



Karen Marie Moning

HIGHLANDER

Books 1-8

HIGHLANDER 01-08
KAREN MARIE MONING

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Beyond the Highland Myst

Karen Marie Moning

BELTANE

(Spring)

You spotted snakes with double tongue

Thorny hedgehogs be not seen;

Newts and blind worms, do no wrong

Come not near our fairy queen.

SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

PROLOGUE

SCOTLAND

1 FEBRUARY 1513

THE FRAGRANCE OF JASMIN AND SANDALWOOD DRIFTED through the rowan trees. Above dew-drenched branches, a lone gull ghosted a bank of mist and soared to kiss the dawn over the white sands of Morar. The turquoise tide shimmered in shades of mermaid tails against the alabaster shore.

The elegant royal court of the Tuatha De Danaan dappled the stretch of lush greenery. Pillowed chaises in brilliant scarlet and lemon adorned the grassy knoll, scattered in a half-moon about the outdoor dais.

"They say he is even more beautiful than you," the Queen remarked to the man sprawled indolently at the foot of her dais.

"Impossible." His mocking laughter tinkled like cut-crystal chimes on a fae wind.

"They say his manhood at half-mast would make a stallion envious." The Queen slanted a glance beneath half-lowered lids at her rapt courtiers.

"More likely a mouse," sneered the man at her feet. Elegant fingers demonstrated a puny space of air, and titters sliced the mist.

"They say at full-mast he steals a woman's mind from her body. Claims her soul." The Queen dropped fringed lashes to shield eyes alight with the iridescent fire of mischievous intent. *How easily my men are provoked!*

The man rolled his eyes and disdain etched his arrogant profile. He crossed his legs at the ankles and gazed out across the sea.

But the Queen wasn't fooled. The man at her feet was vainglorious, and not as impervious to her provocation as he feigned.

"Quit baiting him, my Queen," King Finnbheara admonished. "You know how the fool gets when his ego is wounded." He patted her arm soothingly. "You've teased him enough."

The Queen's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She briefly considered forgoing this vein of revenge. A calculating look at her men dashed that thought, as she recalled what she'd overheard them discussing late last evening in excruciating detail.

The things they'd said were unforgivable. The Queen was not a woman to be compared with another woman and found lacking. Her lip tightened imperceptibly. Her exquisitely delicate hand curled into a fist. She carefully selected her next words.

"But I have found him to be all that they say," the Queen purred.

In the silence that followed, the statement lingered, unacknowledged, for the cut was too cruel to dignify. The

King at her side and the man at her feet shifted restlessly. She was beginning to think she hadn't made her point quite painfully clear enough when, in unison, they rose to her bait. "Who is this man?"

Queen Aoibheal of the Fairy disguised a satisfied smile with a delicate yawn, and drank deeply of her men's jealousy. "They call him the Hawk."

CHAPTER 1

SCOTLAND

1 APRIL 1513

SIDHEACH JAMES LYON DOUGLAS, THIRD EARL OF DALKEITH, stalked across the floor. Droplets of water trickled from his wet hair down his broad chest, and gathered into a single rivulet between the double ridges of muscle in his abdomen. Moonlight shimmered through the open window, casting a silvery glow to his bronze skin, creating the illusion that he was sculpted of molten steel.

The tub behind him had grown cold and been forgotten. The woman on the bed was also cold and forgotten. She knew it.

And she didn't like it one bit.

Too beautiful for me, Esmerelda thought. But by the saints, the man was a poison draught, another long cool swallow of his body the only cure for the toxin. She thought about the things she had done to win him, to share his bed, and—God forgive her—the things she would do to stay there.

She almost hated him for it. She knew she hated herself for it. *He should be mine*, she thought. She watched him stalk across the spacious room to the window which opened between fluted granite columns that met in a high arch twenty feet above her head. Esmerelda sneered at him behind his back. Foolish—such large unprotected openings in a keep—or arrogant. So what if one could lie in the massive goosedown bed and gaze through the rosy arch at a velvety sky pierced by glittering stars?

She'd caught him gazing that way tonight as he'd slammed into her, exciting that bottomless hunger in her blood with the rock-hard kind of maleness only he possessed. She'd whimpered beneath him in the greatest ecstasy she'd ever experienced and he'd been looking out the window—as if no one else was there with him.

Had he been counting the stars?

Silently reciting bawdy dittys to prevent himself from toppling over and falling asleep?

She'd lost him.

No, Esmerelda vowed, she would *never* lose him.

"Hawk?"

"Hmmm?"

She smoothed the lavender silk sheet through her trembling fingers. "Come back to bed, Hawk."

"I'm restless tonight, sweet." He toyed with the stem of a large pale blue blossom. A half hour earlier he'd swept the dewy petals along her silken skin.

Esmerelda flinched at his open admission that he still had energy to spare. Sleepily sated, she could see that his body still thrummed from head to toe with restless vigor. What kind of woman would it take—or how many—to leave that man drowsing in fascinated satisfaction?

More woman than she, and ye gods, how that offended her.

Had her sister left him more sated? Her sister who had warmed his bed until Zeldie had found a way to take her place?

"Am I better than my sister?" The words were out before she could prevent them. She bit her lip, anxiously awaiting his answer.

Her words dragged his smoky gaze from the starry night, across the wide expanse of the bedchamber, to rest on the sultry, raven-haired Gypsy. "Esmerelda," he chided gently.

"Am I?" Her husky contralto soared to a shrewish pitch.

He sighed. "We've had this discussion before—"

"And you never answer me."

"Stop comparing yourself, sweet. You know it's foolish..."

"How can I not when you can compare me to a hundred, nay a thousand, even my own sister?" Shapely brows puckered in a scowl above her flashing eyes.

His laughter rolled. "And how many do you compare me to, lovely Esmerelda?"

"My sister couldn't have been as good as me. She was nearly a *virgin*." She spit out the word with distaste. Life was too unpredictable for virginity to be a prized possession among her people. Lust, in all its facets, was a healthy aspect of the Rom culture.

He raised a hand in warning. "Stop. Now."

But she couldn't. The poison words of accusation tumbled out fast and furious at the only man who had ever made her pagan blood sing, and his boredom between her thighs had been chiseled in granite upon his perfect face this very eve. In truth, for many evenings now.

He suffered her rage in silence, and when at last her tongue rested, he turned back to his window. The howl of a solitary wolf ruptured the night and she felt an answering cry well up within her. She knew the Hawk's silence was his farewell. Stinging with rejection and humiliation, she lay trembling in his bed—the bed she knew she would never be asked to enter again.

She would kill for him.

Which is precisely what she meant to do moments later when she rushed him with the silver dirk she'd slipped from the table by the bed. Esmerelda might have been able to leave without swearing an oath of vengeance, if he had looked surprised. Momentarily alarmed. *Sorry*, even.

But he exhibited none of these emotions. His perfect face lit up with laughter as he spun effortlessly, caught her arm and sent the dirk hurtling through the open window.

He laughed.

And she cursed him. And all his begotten and any subsequent misbegotten.

When he shushed her with kisses, she cursed through gritted teeth, even as her traitorous body melted for his touch. No man should be so beautiful. No man

should be so untouchable. And so damned fearless.

No man should be able to forsake Esmerelda. He was done with her, but she wasn't done with him. She would never be done with him.

* * * * *

"It wasn't your fault, Hawk," Grimm offered. They sat upon the cobbled terrace of Dalkeith sipping port and smoking imported tobacco in purely male contentment.

Sidheach James Lyon Douglas rubbed his perfect jaw with a perfect hand, irritated by the perfect shadow of stubble that always appeared just a few hours after shaving.

"I just don't understand, Grimm. I thought she'd found pleasure with me. Why would she seek to kill me?"

Grimm arched a brow. "Just what do you *do* to the lasses in bed, Hawk?"

"I give them what they want. Fantasy. My willing flesh and blood to serve their every whim."

"And how do you know what a woman's fantasies are?" Grimm wondered aloud.

The Earl of Dalkeith laughed softly, a heady, confident rumble of a purr that he knew drove women wild. "Ah, Grimm, you just have to listen with your whole body. In her eyes she tells you, whether she knows it or not. In her soft cries she guides you. In the subtle turnings of her body, you know if she wants you in front or behind her lush curves. With gentleness or with power; if she desires a tender lover or seeks a beast. If she likes her lips kissed, or savagely devoured. If she likes her breasts—"

"I get the picture," Grimm interrupted, swallowing hard. He shifted in his chair and uncrossed his legs. Recrossed them and tugged at his kilt. Uncrossed them again and sighed. "And Esmerelda? Did you understand her fantasies?"

"Only too well. One of them included being Lady Hawk."

"She had to know it couldn't be, Hawk. Everyone knows you've been as good as wed since King James decreed your betrothal."

"As good as *dead*. And I don't want to talk about it."

"The time draws near, Hawk. You're not only going to have to talk about it, you're going to have to do something about it—like go collect your bride. Time is running out. Or don't you care?"

Hawk slanted a savage look Grimm's way.

"Just making sure, that's all. There's scarce a fortnight left, remember?"

Hawk stared out into the crystalline night, heavy with glowing stars. "How could I forget?"

"You really think James would carry out his threats if you don't wed the Comyn lass?"

"Absolutely," Hawk said flatly.

"I just don't understand why he hates you so much."

A sardonic smile flitted across the Hawk's face. He knew why James hated him. Thirty years ago Hawk's parents had humiliated James to the seat of his vain soul. Since the Hawk's father had died before James could avenge himself, the king had turned on Hawk in his father's stead.

For fifteen long years James had controlled every minute of the Hawk's life. Days before his pledge of service was to expire, James contrived a plan to affect every future moment of it. By the king's decree, the Hawk was being forced to wed a lass he didn't know and didn't want. A reclusive spinster who was rumored to be quite hideous and unquestionably mad. It was King James's twisted idea of a lifetime sentence. "Who fathoms the minds of kings, my friend?" Hawk evaded, pointedly putting an end to the topic.

The two men passed a time in silence, both brooding for different reasons as they stared into the velvety sky. An owl hooted softly from the gardens. Crickets rubbed their legs in sweet concerto, offering twilight tribute to Dalkeith. Stars pulsed and shimmered against the night's blue-black canopy.

"Look. One falls. There, Hawk. What do you make of it?" Grimm pointed at a white speck plummeting from the heavens, leaving a milky tail glowing in its

wake.

"Esmerelda says if you make a wish upon such a falling star'twill be granted."

"Did you wish just now?"

"Tinker talk," Hawk scoffed. "Foolish romantic nonsense for dreamy-eyed lasses." Of course he'd wished. Every time he'd seen a falling star lately. Always the same wish. After all, the time *was* nearing.

"Well, I'm trying it," Grimm grumbled, not to be swayed by Hawk's mockery. "I wish..."

"Yield, Grimm. What's your wish?" Hawk asked curiously.

"None of your concern. You don't believe."

"I? The eternal romantic who enchants legions with his poetry and seduction—not a believer in all those lovely female things?"

Grimm shot his friend a warning look. "Careful, Hawk. Mock them at your own risk. You may just really make a lass angry one day. And you *won't* know how to deal with it. For the time being, they still fall for your perfect smiles—"

"You mean like this one." Hawk arched a brow and flashed a smile, complete with sleepily hooded eyes that spoke volumes about how the lass receiving it was the only true beauty in his heart, a heart which had room for only one—whoever happened to be in the Hawk's arms at the moment.

Grimm shook his head in mock disgust. "You practice it. You must. Come on, admit it."

"Of course I do. It works. Wouldn't you practice it?"

"Womanizer."

"Uh-hmm," Hawk agreed. "Do you even remember their names?"

"All five thousand of them." Hawk hid his grin behind a swallow of port.

"Blackguard. Libertine."

"Rogue. Roue. Cad. Ah, here's a good one: 'voluptuary,' " Hawk supplied helpfully.

"Why don't they see through you?"

Hawk shrugged a shoulder. "They like what they get from me. There are a lot of hungry lasses out there. I couldn't, in good conscience, turn them away. 'Twould trouble my head."

"I think I know exactly which head of yours would be troubled," Grimm said dryly. "The very one that's going to get you in big trouble one day."

"What did you wish for, Grimm?" Hawk ignored the warning with the devil-may-care attitude that was his wont where the lasses were concerned.

A slow smile slid over Grimm's face. "A lass who doesn't want you. A lovely, nay, an earth-shatteringly beautiful one, with wit and wisdom to boot. One with a perfect face and a perfect body, and a perfect 'no' on her perfect lips for you, my oh-so-perfect friend. And I also wished to be allowed to watch the battle."

Hawk smiled smugly. "It will *never* happen."

* * * * *

The wind gusting sweetly through the pines carried a disembodied voice that drifted on a breeze of jasmine and sandalwood. Then it spoke in laughing words neither man heard. "*I think that can be arranged.*"

CHAPTER 2

THE MYSTICAL ISLE OF MORAR WAS CLOAKED IN EVENTIDE, the silica sands glistening silver beneath King Finnbheara's boots as he paced, impatiently awaiting the court fool's return.

The Queen and her favorite courtiers were merrily celebrating the Beltane in a remote Highland village. Watching his elfin Aoibheal dance and flirt with the mortal Highlanders had goaded his slumbering jealousy into wakeful wrath. He'd fled the Beltane fires before he could succumb to his desire to annihilate the entire village. He was too angry with mortals to trust himself around them at the moment. The mere thought of his Queen with a mortal man filled him with fury.

As the fairy Queen had her favorites among their courtiers, so did the fairy King; the wily court fool was his longtime companion in cups and spades. He'd dispatched the fool to study the mortal Hawk, to gather information so he might concoct a fitting revenge for the man who'd dared trespass on fairy territory.

"His manhood at half-mast would make a stallion envious... he claims a woman's soul." King Finnbheara mocked his Queen's words in scathing falsetto, then spit irritably.

"I'm afraid it's true," the fool said flatly as he appeared in the shade of a rowan tree.

"Really?" King Finnbheara grimaced. He'd convinced himself Aoibheal had embellished a bit—after all, the man was mortal.

The fool scowled. "I spent three days in Edinburgh. The man's a living legend. The women clamor over him. They speak his name as if it's some mystic incantation guaranteed to bestow eternal ecstasy."

"Did you see him? With your own eyes? Is he beautiful?" the King asked quickly.

The fool nodded and his mouth twisted bitterly. "He's flawless. He's taller than me—"

"You're well over six feet in that glamour!" the King objected.

"He stands almost a hand taller. He has raven hair worn in a sleek tail; smoldering black eyes; the chiseled perfection of a young god and the body of Viking warrior. It's revolting. May I maim him, my liege? Disfigure his perfect countenance?"

King Finnbheara pondered this information. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach at the thought of this dark mortal touching his Queen's fair limbs, bringing her incomparable pleasure. *Claiming her soul.*

"I will kill him for you," the fool offered hopefully.

King Finnbheara gestured impatiently. "Fool! And break the Compact between our races? No. There must be another way."

The fool shrugged. "Perhaps we should sit back and do nothing. The Hawk is about to come to harm at his own race's hand."

"Tell me more," Finnbheara ordered, his interest piqued.

"I discovered that the Hawk is to be wed in a few days. He is affianced by his mortal king's decree. Destruction is about to befall him. You see, my liege, King James has ordered the Hawk to wed a woman named Janet Comyn. The king has made it clear that if the Hawk doesn't wed this woman, he will destroy both the Douglas and Comyn clans."

"So? What's your point?" Finnbheara asked impatiently.

"Janet Comyn is dead. She died today."

Finnbheara tensed instantly. "Did you harm her, fool?"

"No, my liege!" The fool gave him a wounded look. "She died by her father's hand. I no more put the idea in his head than a key to her tower in his sporran."

"Does that mean you did or you didn't put the idea in his head?" the King asked suspiciously.

"Come now, my liege," the fool pouted, "think you I would resort to such trickery and jeopardize us all?"

Finnbheara templed his fingers and studied the fool. Unpredictable, cunning, and

careless, the jester had not yet been foolish enough to risk their race. "Go on."

The fool cocked his head and his smile gleamed in the half-light. "It's simple. The wedding can't take place now. King James is going to destroy the Douglas. Oh, the Comyn too," he added irreverently.

"Ah!" Finnbheara debated a pensive moment. He didn't have to lift a finger and the Hawk would soon die.

But it wasn't enough, he seethed. Finnbheara wanted his own hand in the Hawk's destruction. He had suffered personal insult, and he wanted an intimately personal revenge. No mortal man cuckolded the King of the Fairy, without divine retribution—and how divine it would feel to destroy the Hawk.

The glimmer of an idea began to take shape in his mind. As he considered it, King Finnbheara felt more vital than he had in centuries.

The fool didn't miss the smug smile that teased the King's lips.

"You're thinking something wicked. What are you planning, my liege?" the fool asked.

"Silence," King Finnbheara commanded. He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully as he sifted through his options, carefully refining his scheme.

If time passed while Finnbheara plotted, neither fairy noticed; time meant little to the race of beings who could move about in it at will. The first flames of dawn painted the sky above the sea when the King spoke again:

"Has the Hawk ever loved?"

"Loved?" the fool echoed blankly.

"You know, that emotion for which mortals compose sonnets, fight wars, erect monuments," the King said dryly.

The fool reflected a moment. "I would say no, my King. The Hawk has never wooed a woman he didn't win, nor does it appear he ever desired any special woman over another."

"A woman has never denied him?" King Finnbheara asked with a trace of

incredulity.

"Not that I could find. I don't think the woman lives and breathes in the sixteenth century who *could* deny him. I'm telling you, the man's a legend. Women swoon over him."

The King smiled avariciously. "I have another errand for you, fool."

"Anything, my liege. Let me kill him."

"No! There will be no blood spilled by our hand. Listen to me carefully. Go now through the centuries. Go forward—women are more independent and self-possessed there. Find me a woman who is irresistible, exquisite, intelligent, strong; one who knows her own mind. Bid you well, she must be a woman who won't lose her wits being tossed through time, she must be adaptable to strange events. It wouldn't do to bring her to him and have her brain addled. She must believe in a bit of magic."

The fool nodded. "Too true. Remember that tax accountant we took back to the twelfth century? She turned into a raving lunatic."

"Exactly. The woman you find must be somewhat inured to the unusual so she can accept time travel without coming undone." Finnbheara mulled this over a moment. "I have it! Look in Salem, where they still believe in witches, or perhaps New Orleans, where the ancient magic sizzles in the air."

"Perfect places!" the fool enthused.

"But most important, fool, you must find me a woman who harbors a special hatred for beautiful, womanizing men; a woman guaranteed to make that mortal's life a living hell."

The fool smiled fiendishly. "May I embellish on your plan?"

"You're a crucial part of it," the King said with sinister promise.

* * * * *

Adrienne de Simone shivered, although it was an unusually warm May evening in Seattle. She pulled a sweater over her head and tugged the French doors closed. She stared out through the glass and watched night descend over the

gardens that tumbled in wild disarray beyond the walk.

In the fading light she surveyed the stone wall that protected her house at 93 Coattail Lane, then turned her methodical scrutiny to the shadows beneath the stately oaks, seeking any irregular movement. She took a deep breath and ordered herself to relax. The guard dogs that patrolled the grounds were quiet—things must be safe, she assured herself firmly.

Inexplicably tense, she entered the code on the alarm pad that would activate the motion detectors strategically mounted throughout the one-acre lawn. Any nonrandom motion over one hundred pounds in mass and three feet in height would trigger the detectors, although the shrill warning would not summon the police or any law enforcement agency.

Adrienne would run for her gun before she'd run for a phone. She'd summon the devil himself before she'd dream of calling the police. Although six months had passed, Adrienne still felt as if she couldn't get far enough from New Orleans, not even if she moved across an ocean or two, which she couldn't do anyway; the percentage of fugitives apprehended while trying to leave the country was shockingly high.

Was that what she really was? she marveled. It never failed to astonish her, even after all these months. How could she—Adrienne de Simone—be a fugitive? She'd always been an honest, law-abiding citizen. All she'd ever asked of life was a home and a place to belong; someone to love and someone who loved her; children someday—children she would never abandon to an orphanage.

She'd found all of that in Eberhard Darrow Garrett, the toast of New Orleans society, or so she'd thought.

Adrienne snorted as she surveyed the lawn a final time then dropped the drapes across the doors. A few years ago the world had seemed like such a different place; a wonderful place, full of promise, excitement, and endless possibility.

Armed only with her irrepressible spirit and three hundred dollars cash, Adrienne Doe had invented a last name for herself and fled the orphanage on the day she'd turned eighteen. She'd been thrilled to discover student loans for which practically anyone could qualify, even an unsecured risk like an orphan. She'd taken a job as a waitress, enrolled in college, and embarked on her quest to make

something of herself. Just what, she wasn't sure, but she'd always had a feeling that something special was waiting around the next corner for her.

She'd been twenty, a sophomore at the university, when that special thing had happened. Working at the Blind Lemon, an elegant restaurant and bar, Adrienne had caught the eye, the heart, and the engagement ring of the darkly handsome, wealthy Eberhard Darrow Garrett, the bachelor of the decade. It had been the perfect fairy tale. She'd walked around for months on clouds of happiness.

When the clouds had started to melt beneath her feet, she'd refused to look too closely, refused to acknowledge that the fairy-tale prince might be a prince of darker things.

Adrienne squeezed her eyes shut wishing she could blink some of her bad memories out of existence. How gullible she'd been! How many excuses she'd made—for him, for herself—until she'd finally had to run.

A tiny meow coaxed her back to the present and she smiled down at the one good thing that had come of it all; her kitten, Moonshadow, a precocious stray she'd found outside a gas station on her way north. Moonie rubbed her ankles and purred enthusiastically. Adrienne scooped up the furry little creature, hugging her close. Unconditional love, such was the gift Moonie gave. Love without reservation or subterfuge—pure affection with no darker sides.

Adrienne hummed lightly as she rubbed Moonie's ears, then broke off abruptly as a faint scratching sound drew her attention to the windows again.

Perfectly still, she clutched Moonie and waited, holding her breath.

But there was only silence.

It must have been a twig scratching at the roof, she decided. But, hadn't she cut all the trees back from the house when she'd moved in?

Adrienne sighed, shook her head, and ordered her muscles to relax. She had nearly succeeded when overhead a floorboard creaked. Tension reclaimed her instantly. She dropped Moonie on a stuffed chair and eyed the ceiling intently as the creaking sound repeated. Perhaps it was just the house settling. She really had to get over this skittishness. How much time had to pass until she stopped being afraid that she would turn around and see Eberhard standing there with his

faintly mocking smile and gleaming gun? Eberhard was dead. She was safe, she knew she was. So why did she feel so horribly vulnerable? For the past few days she'd had the suffocating sensation that someone was spying on her. No matter how hard she tried to reassure herself that anyone who might wish her harm was either dead—or didn't know she was alive—she was still consumed by a morbid unease. Every instinct she possessed warned her that something was wrong—or about to go terribly wrong. Having grown up in the City of Spooks—the sultry, superstitious, magical New Orleans—Adrienne had learned to listen to her instincts. They were almost always right on target.

Her instincts had even been right about Eberhard. She'd had a bad feeling about him from the beginning, but she'd convinced herself it was her own insecurity. Eberhard was the catch of New Orleans; naturally, a woman might feel a little unsettled by such a man.

Only much later did she understand that she'd been lonely for so long, and had wanted the fairy tale so badly, that she'd tried to force reality to reflect her desires, instead of the other way around. She'd told herself so many white lies before finally facing the truth that Eberhard wasn't the man she'd thought he was. She'd been such a fool.

Adrienne breathed deeply of the spring air that breezed gently in the window behind her, then flinched and spun abruptly. She eyed the fluttering drapes warily. Hadn't she closed that window? She was sure of it. She'd closed all of them, just before closing the French doors. Adrienne edged cautiously to the window, shut it quickly, and locked it.

It was nerves, nothing more. No face peered in the window at her, no dogs barked, no alarms sounded. What was the use of taking so many precautions if she couldn't relax? There couldn't *possibly* be anyone out there.

Adrienne forced herself to turn away from the window. As she padded across the room her foot encountered a small object and sent it skidding across the faded Oushak rug, where it clunked to a rest against the wall.

Adrienne glanced at it and flinched. It was a piece from Eberhard's chess set, the one she'd swiped from his house in New Orleans the night she'd fled. She'd forgotten all about it after she'd moved in. She'd tossed it in a box—one of those piled in the corner that she'd never gotten around to unpacking. Perhaps Moonie

had dragged the pieces out, she mused, there were several of them scattered across the rug.

She retrieved the piece she'd kicked and rolled it gingerly between her fingers. Waves of emotion flooded her; a sea of shame and anger and humiliation, capped with a relentless fear that she still wasn't safe.

A draft of air kissed the back of her neck and she stiffened, clutching the chess piece so tightly that the crown of the black queen dug cruelly into her palm. Logic insisted that the windows behind her were shut—she *knew* they were, still—instinct told her otherwise.

The rational Adrienne *knew* there was no one in her library but herself and a lightly snoring kitten. The irrational Adrienne teetered on the brink of terror.

Laughing nervously, she berated herself for being so jumpy, then cursed Eberhard for making her this way. She would *not* succumb to paranoia.

Dropping to her knees without sparing a backward glance, Adrienne scooped the scattered chess pieces into a pile. She didn't really like to touch them. A woman couldn't spend her childhood in New Orleans—much of it at the feet of a Creole storyteller who'd lived behind the orphanage—without becoming a bit superstitious. The set was ancient, an original Viking set; an old legend claimed it was cursed, and Adrienne's life had been cursed enough. The only reason she'd pilfered the set was in case she needed quick cash. Carved of walrus ivory and ebony, it would command an exorbitant price from a collector. Besides, hadn't she earned it, after all he'd put her through?

Adrienne muttered a colorful invective about beautiful men. It wasn't morally acceptable that someone as evil as Eberhard had been so nice to look at. Poetic justice demanded otherwise—shouldn't people's faces reflect their hearts? If

Eberhard had been as ugly on the outside as she'd belatedly discovered he was on the inside, she never would have ended up at the wrong end of a gun. Of course, Adrienne had learned the hard way that any end of a gun was the wrong end.

Eberhard Darrow Garrett was a beautiful, womanizing, deceitful man—and he'd ruined her life. Clutching the black queen tightly she made herself a firm

promise. "I will never go out with a beautiful man again, so long as I live and breathe. I hate beautiful men. Hate them!"

* * * * *

Outside the French doors at 93 Coattail Lane, a man who lacked substance, a creature manmade devices could neither detect nor contain, heard her words and smiled. His choice was made with swift certainty—Adrienne de Simone was definitely the woman he'd been searching for.



CHAPTER 3

ADRIENNE HAD NO IDEA HOW SHE ENDED UP ON THE MAN'S LAP. NONE.

One moment she was perfectly sane—perhaps a bit neurotic, but firmly convinced of her sanity nonetheless—and the next moment the ground disappeared beneath her feet and she was sucked down one of Alice's rabbit holes.

Her first thought was that she must be dreaming: a vivid, horrifying subconscious foray into a barbaric nightmare.

But that didn't make any sense; only moments before, she'd been petting Moonshadow or doing... something... what? She couldn't have just fallen asleep without even knowing it!

Maybe she'd stumbled and struck her head, and this hallucination was the dreamy result of a concussion.

Or maybe not, she worried as she looked around the cavernous smoky room filled with oddly dressed people speaking a mutilated version of the English tongue.

You've done it now, Adrienne, she mused soberly. *You've finally slipped over the edge, heels still kicking*. Adrienne struggled to focus her eyes, which felt strangely heavy. The man who clutched her was revolting. He was a belching beast with thick arms and a fat belly, and he smelled.

Only moments ago she'd been in her library, hadn't she?

A greasy hand squeezed her breast and she yelped aloud. Bewilderment was vanquished by embarrassed outrage when his hand deliberately grazed the crest of her nipple through her sweater. Even if this was a dream, she couldn't permit that kind of activity to pass without redress. She opened her mouth to deliver a scathing tongue lashing, but he beat her to the punch. His pink mouth in that tangled mass of hair expanded into a wide *O*. Dear *heaven* but the man hadn't even finished chewing, and no wonder—his few remaining teeth were stumpy

and brown.

It was with revulsion that Adrienne wiped bits of chicken and spittle from her face when he roared, but it was with genuine alarm that she comprehended his words, through his thick brogue.

She was a godsend, he proclaimed to the room at large. She was a gift from the angels.

She would be married on the morrow.

Adrienne fainted. Her unconscious body spasmed once, then went limp. The black queen slipped from her hand, hit the floor, and was kicked under a table by a scuffed leather boot.

* * * * *

When Adrienne awoke, she lay still, her eyes squeezed tightly shut. Beneath her back she felt the lumpy down ticks piled thickly. It could be her own bed. She had purchased antique ticks and had them restitched to plump atop her waist-high Queen Anne bed. She was in love with old things, no dithering about it.

She sniffed cautiously. No odd scents from the banquet she'd dreamt. No hum of that thick brogue she'd imagined earlier.

But no traffic either.

She strained her ears, listening mightily. Had she ever heard such silence?

Adrienne drew a ragged breath and willed her heart to slow.

She tossed on the lumpy tick. Was this how insanity occurred? Started with a vague inkling of unease, a dreadful sense of being watched, then escalated rapidly into full blown madness, only to culminate in a nightmare where a smelly, hairy beast announced her impending nuptials?

Adrienne squeezed her eyes even more tightly shut, willing her return to sanity. The silhouette of a chess set loomed in her mind; battle-ready rooks and bitter queens etched in stark relief against the insides of her eyelids, and it seemed that there was something urgent she needed to remember. What had she been doing?

Her head hurt. It was a dull kind of ache, accompanied by the bitter taste of old

pennies in the back of her throat. For a moment she struggled against it, but the throbbing intensified. The chess set danced elusively in shades of black and white, then dissolved into a distant nagging detail. It couldn't have been too important.

Adrienne had more pressing things to worry about—where in the blue blazes was she?

She kept her eyes closed and waited. A few moments more and she would hear the purr of a BMW tooling sleekly down Coattail Lane or her phone would peal angrily...

A rooster did *not* just crow.

Another minute and she'd hear Moonie's questioning *mer-ooow*, and feel her tail swish past her face as she leapt up on the bed.

She did *not* hear the grate of squeaky hinges, the scrape of a door cut too long against a stone threshold.

"Milady, I know you're awake."

Her eyes sprang open to find a portly woman with silver-brown hair and rosy cheeks, wringing her hands as she stood at the foot of the bed. "Who are you?" Adrienne asked warily, refusing to look at any more of the room than the immediate spot that contained this latest apparition.

"Bah! Who am *I* she asks? The lass who pops out of nowhere, lickety-split, like a witch if you please, is wishing to know who I am? Hmmph!"

With that, the woman placed a platter of peculiar-smelling food on a nearby table, and forced Adrienne up by plumping the pillows behind her back.

"I'm Talia. I've been sent to see to your care. Eat up. You'll never be strong enough to face wedding *him* if you doona be eating," she chided.

With those words and a full glimpse of the stone walls hung with vividly colored tapestries depicting hunts and orgies, Adrienne fainted again—this time, with relish.

* * * * *

Adrienne awoke again to a score of maids bearing undergarments, stockings, and a wedding dress.

The women bathed her in scented water before a massive stone fireplace. While she huddled submerged in the deep wooden tub, Adrienne examined every inch of the room. How could a dream be so vivid, so rich with scent and touch and sound? The bathwater smelled of fresh heather and lilac. The maids chatted lightly as they bathed her. The stone fireplace was easily as tall as three men—it rose up to kiss the ceiling and sprawled along half the width of the east wall. It was bedecked with an array of artistic silver-work; delicately filigreed baskets, cunningly handcrafted roses that gleamed like molten silver, yet each petal distinct and looking somehow velvety. Above the great mantel, rough-hewn of honey oak, hung a hunt scene depicting a bloody victory.

Her study was cut short by the screech of the door. Shocked gasps and immediately hushed voices compelled her gaze over one bare shoulder, and she, too, gasped aloud. The villain with the matted rug upon his face! Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment and she sunk deeper into the tub.

"Milord, 'tis no place for you—" a maid began.

The slap ricocheted through the room, silencing the maid's protest and halting anyone else's before they even considered beginning. The great greasy beast from earlier in her nightmare sunk down on his haunches before the steaming tub, a leer on his face. Slitted blue eyes met steely gray as Adrienne held his rude stare levelly.

His eyes dropped from hers, searched the water line and probed below it. He grinned at the sight of her rosy nipples before she crossed her arms and hugged herself tightly.

"Methinks he doesn't do so badly for himself," the man murmured. Then, dragging his eyes from the water to her flushed face, he commanded, "From this moment forth, your name is Janet Comyn."

Adrienne shot him a haughty look. "My name," she snapped, "is Adrienne de Simone."

Crack!

She raised a hand to her cheek in disbelief. A maid cried out a muffled warning.

"Try it again," he counseled softly, and as soft as his words were, his blue eyes were dangerously hard.

Adrienne rubbed her stinging cheek in silence.

And his hand rose and fell again.

"Milady! We implore you!" A petite maid dropped to her knees beside the tub, placing a hand upon Adrienne's bare shoulder.

"That's right, give her counsel, Bess. You know what becomes of a lass foolish enough to deny me. Say it," he repeated to Adrienne. "Tell me your name is Janet Comyn."

When his beefy hand rose and fell again, it came down on Bess's face with fury. Adrienne screamed as he struck the maid repeatedly.

"Stop!" she cried.

"Say it!" he commanded as his hand rose and fell again. Bess sobbed as she crumpled to the floor, but the man went down after her, his hand now a fist.

"My name is Janet Comyn!" Adrienne cried, half rising from the tub.

The Comyn's fist halted in midair, and he sank back on his haunches, the light of victory gleaming in his eyes. Victory—and that disgusting slow perusal of her flesh.

Adrienne flushed under the sheer lechery of his pale eyes, and plunged her upper body back into the water.

"Nay, he doesn't get a bad bargain at all. You are much more comely than mine own Janet." His mouth twisted into a smile. "Would that I had leisure to taste such plump pillows myself, but you came just in the nick of time."

"Came where?"

"*Came from* where is my question," he countered. Adrienne realized in that instant that to underestimate this brutish man would be a grave mistake. For

behind the slovenly manners and the unkempt appearance was steely mettle and rapier sharp wit. The flabby arm that had felled the blows couched muscle. The pale slitted eyes that wandered restlessly didn't miss a beat. He hadn't punished Bess in rage. He'd beat her in a cold, calculated act to get what he wanted from Adrienne.

She shook her head, her eyes wide with confusion. "Really, I haven't the faintest idea how I got here."

"You don't know where you came from?"

Bess was sobbing softly, and Adrienne's eyes darkened as she watched the maid curl into a ball and surreptitiously try to inch away from the Comyn. His hand shot out and fastened on the maid's ankle. Bess whimpered hopelessly.

"Oh nay, my pretty. I may need you yet." His eyes swept her shuddering form with a possessive leer. Adrienne gasped when he ripped Bess's gown and proceeded to shred it from her body. Adrienne's stomach churned in agony when she saw the great welts rising from the maid's pale flanks and thighs. Cruel, biting welts from a belt or a whip.

The other maids fled the room, leaving her alone with the weeping Bess and the madman.

"This is my world, Adrienne de Simone," he intoned, and Adrienne had a premonition that the words he was about to utter would be carved deeply into her mind for a long time to come. He stroked Bess's quivering thigh lightly. "My rules. My people. My will to command life or death. Yours and hers. 'Tis a simple thing I want of you. If you don't cooperate, she dies. Then another and still another. I will find the very core of that foolish compassion you wear like a shroud. It makes you so easy to use. But women are that way. Weak."

Adrienne sat hunched in silence, her labored breathing an accompaniment to Bess's weary sobs.

"Quiet, lass!" He slapped the maid's face, and she curled into a tighter ball, weeping into her hands to smother the sound.

One day I will kill him with my bare hands, Adrienne vowed silently.

"I don't know how you came to be here or who you are, and frankly, I don't care. I have a problem, and you're going to fix it. If you ever forget what I am about to tell you, if you ever slip, if you ever betray me, I will kill you after I've destroyed everything you care about."

"Where am I?" she asked tonelessly, reluctantly voicing one of the questions that had been bothering her. She was afraid that once she started asking questions, she might discover this really wasn't a dream after all.

"I don't care if you're mad," he chuckled appreciatively. "Fact is, I rather relish the thought that you might have bats flapping in your belfry. God knows, my Janet did. 'Tis no more or less than he deserves."

"Where am I?" she insisted.

"Janet had a difficult time remembering that, too."

"So, where am I?"

The Comyn studied her, then shrugged. "Scotland. Comyn keep—*my* keep."

Her heart stopped beating within her breast. It was not possible. Had she truly gone mad? Adrienne steeled her will to ask the next question—the obvious question, the terrifying question she'd been studiously avoiding since she'd first awoken. She'd learned that sometimes it was safer not to ask too many questions—the answers could be downright unnerving. Obtaining the answer to this question could tamper with her fragile grasp on reason; Adrienne had a suspicion that *where* she was wasn't quite the only problem she had. Drawing a deep breath, she asked carefully, "What year is it?"

The Comyn guffawed. "You really are a wee bit daft, aren't you lass?"

Adrienne glared at him in silence.

He shrugged again. " 'Tis fifteen hundred and thirteen."

"Oh," Adrienne said faintly. *Ohmygodohmygod*, she wailed in the confines of her reeling mind. She took a deep, slow breath, and told herself to start at the beginning of this mystery; perhaps it could be unraveled. "And who exactly are you?"

"For all intents and purposes, I am your father, lass. That's the first of many things you must never forget."

A broken sob temporarily distracted Adrienne from her problems. Poor abused Bess; Adrienne could not bear a person in pain, not if she could do something about it. This man wanted something from her; maybe she could bargain for something in exchange. "Let Bess go," she said.

"Do you pledge your fealty to me in this matter?" He had the flat eyes of a snake, Adrienne realized. Like the python in the Seattle zoo.

"Let her go from this keep. Give her her freedom," she clarified.

"Nay, milady!" Bess shrieked, and the beast chuckled warmly.

His eyes were thoughtful as he stroked Bess's leg. "Methinks, Janet Comyn, you don't understand much of this world. Free her from me and you condemn her to death by starvation, rape, or worse. Free her from my 'loving attentions' and the next man may not be so loving. Your own husband may not be so loving."

Adrienne shivered violently as she struggled to tear her gaze from the plump white hand stroking rhythmically. The source of Bess's pain was the same hand that fed her. "Protected" her. Bile rose in Adrienne's throat, almost choking her.

"Fortunately, he already thinks you're mad, so you may talk as you will after this day. But for this day from dawn till dusk, you will swear that you are Janet Comyn, only blood daughter of the mighty Red Comyn, sworn bride of Sidheach Douglas. You will see this day through as I tell you—

"But what of the real Janet?" she couldn't help but ask.

Slap! How had the man managed to hit her before she could so much as blink? As he stood quivering with rage above her, he said, "The next blows won't be to your face, bitch, for the gown won't cover there. But there are ways to hit that hurt the most, and leave no mark. Don't push me."

Adrienne was silent and obedient through all the things he told her then. His message was plain. If she was silent and obedient, she would stay alive. Dream or no dream, the blows hurt here, and she had a feeling that dying might just hurt here too.

He told her things then. Hundreds of details he expected her to commit to memory. She did so with determination; it temporarily prevented her from contemplating the full extent of her apparent insanity. She repeated each detail, each name, each memory that was not hers. From careful observation of her "father," she was able to guess at many of the memories that had belonged to the woman whose identity she was now to assume.

And all the while a soft mantra hummed through the back of her mind. *This cannot be happening. This is not possible. This cannot be happening.* Yet in the forefront of her mind, realist that she was, she understood that the words *can't* and *impossible* had no bearing when the impossible was indeed happening.

Unless she woke up soon from a nightmarish and vivid dream, she was in Scotland, the was year 1513, and she was indeed getting married.

CHAPTER 4

"SHE'S TALL AS JANETT."

"Not many as tall as she."

"Hush! She *is* Janet! Else he'll have our heads on serving platters."

"What happened to Janet?" Adrienne asked softly. She wasn't surprised when the mouths of a half-dozen maids clamped shut and they turned their complete attention to dressing her in stalwart silence.

Adrienne rolled her eyes. If they wouldn't tell her a thing about Janet, perhaps they'd talk about her bridegroom.

"So, who is this man I am to wed?" *Sidhawk Douglas. What kind of name was Sidhawk anyway?*

The maids tittered like a covey of startled quail.

"Truth of it is, milady, we've only heard tales of him. This betrothal was commanded by King James himself."

"What are the tales?" Adrienne asked wryly.

"His exploits are legendary!"

"His conquests are legion. 'Tis rumored he's traveled the world accompanied by only the most beautiful lasses."

"'Tis said there isna a comely lass in all of Scotia he hasna tumbled—"

"—in England, too!"

"—and he canna recall any of their names."

"He is said to have godlike beauty, and a practiced hand in the fine art of seduction."

"He is fabulously wealthy and rumors say his castle is luxurious beyond compare."

Adrienne blinked. "Wonderful. A materialistic, unfaithful, beautiful playboy of a self-indulged, inconsiderate man with a bad memory. And he's all mine. Dear sweet God, what have I done to deserve this?" she wondered aloud. *Twice*, she brooded privately.

Lisbelle looked at her curiously. "But the rumors tell he is a magnificent lover and most comely to look upon, milady. What could be wrong with that?"

Methinks you don't understand this world, Janet Comyn. Perhaps he was right. "Does he beat his women?"

"He doesn't keep them long enough, or so they say."

"Although, I hear tell one of his women tried to kill him recently. I can't imagine why," the maid added, genuinely puzzled. "'Tis said he is more than generous with his mistresses when he's done with them."

"I can imagine why," Adrienne grumbled irritably, suddenly impatient with all the plucking, fastening, adorning, and arranging hands on her body. "Stop, stop." She lightly slapped Lisbelle's hands from her hair, which had been washed, combed mercilessly, and teased torturously for what felt like years.

"But milady, we must do something with this hair. 'Tis so straight! You must look your best—"

"Personally, I'd prefer to look like something the cat dragged in. Wet, bedraggled, and smelling like a ripe dungheap."

Gasps resounded. "Lass, he will be your husband, and you could do far worse," a stern voice cut across the room. Adrienne turned slowly and met the worldly-wise gaze of a woman with whom she felt an instant kinship. "You could have mine, for lack of a better example."

Adrienne sucked in a harsh breath. "The Laird Comyn?"

"Your *father*, my darling daughter," Lady Althea Comyn said with an acid smile. "Begone—all of you." She ushered the maids from the room with a regal hand, her eyes lingering overlong on Bess. "He'll kill the lass one day, he will," she said softly. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly for a long moment.

"He explained what you must do?"

Adrienne nodded.

"And you will do it?"

Again she nodded. The Lady Comyn expelled a sigh of relief.

"If there is aught a time I may repay the kindness—"

"It's not a kindness. It's to save my life."

"—you need only ask. For it saves mine own."

* * * * *

Adrienne stood tall before the man of the cloth, fulfilling her part of the farce. "I am Janet Comyn," she proclaimed loudly. God's man paled visibly and clutched his Bible until his knuckles looked to split at the seams. *So he knows I'm not*, she mused. *What on earth is really going on here?*

She felt a presence near her left shoulder, and turned reluctantly to face the man she was to wed. Her eyes met the area slightly below his breastbone and every inch of it was encased in steel.

Adrienne started to rise and look her fiance in the face, when she realized with horror that she wasn't kneeling. Beyond chagrined, she tipped her head back and swallowed a thousand frantic protests that clotted in her throat.

The giant stared back with an inscrutable expression, flames from flickering candles dancing in the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

I can't marry him, she screamed silently. *I can't do it!*

Her eyes fled his countenance and chafed lightly across the audience in search of someone to save her from this debacle. Bess sat in the rear pew, eyes closed in supplication.

Adrienne flinched and closed her eyes in kind. *Please God, if I've gone mad, please make me sane again. And if I haven't gone mad and somehow this is really happening—I'm sorry I wasn't grateful for the twentieth century. I'm sorry I did what I did to Eberhard. I'm sorry for everything, and I promise I'll be a*

better person if you just GET ME OUT OF HERE!

When she opened her eyes again she could have sworn the man of the cloth had a knowing and rather amused gleam in his eye.

"Help me," she mouthed silently.

Quickly, he lowered his eyes to the floor. He didn't raise them again.

In spite of herself, Adrienne dragged her reluctant gaze to the midsection of her bridegroom, then upward even farther, to his darkly handsome face.

He arched a brow at her as the flutists piped away, the rhythm increasing in gaiety and tempo.

She was rescued from the stress of his regard when a ruckus erupted and she heard the furious voice of her "father" carrying to the rafters.

"What say you he couldna come himself?" Red Comyn shouted at the soldier.

"'Twas a bit of a problem in North Uster. The Hawk had to ride out in haste, but he hasna forsaken his pledge. He does no dishonor to the clans." The soldier delivered his rehearsed message.

"He dishonors the troth by not being here!" Lord Comyn roared. Then he turned to the man at Adrienne's side. "And who are you, to come in his stead?"

"Grimm Roderick, Hawk's captain of the guard. I come to wed your daughter as his proxy—"

"A pox on proxy! How dare he not come to claim my daughter himself?"

"It's perfectly legal. The king will recognize it and the troth is thus fulfilled."

Adrienne couldn't prevent the joy that leapt into her face at his words. This man wasn't her husband!

"Am I so offensive then, lass?" he asked, smiling mockingly, not missing one ounce of her relief.

About as offensive as a platter of strawberries dipped in dark chocolate and topped with whipped cream, she thought wryly.

"I'd sooner marry a toad," Adrienne said.

His laughter teased a miserly smile from her lips.

"Then you're definitely out of luck, milady. For the Hawk is no toad for certain. I, lass, standing next to the Hawk, am truly a toad. Nay—a troll. Worse still, a horned and warty lizard. A—"

"I get the picture." *Dear heaven, deliver me from perfection.* "Where is he, then, my unwilling husband?"

"Managing the aftermath of a serious problem."

"And that might be?"

"A grave and terrible uprising."

"In North Uster?"

"Close." The man's lips twitched.

Adrienne was seized by a fit of urgency. No matter how she dragged her feet, this deed would be done. If she had to face the unknown, she'd like to tackle it now. Waiting only made it worse, and Lord Comyn's shouting combined with the wild cacophony of floundering flutists was flaying her nerves. *Mad, am I, Janet? Works for me.* Straightening to her full five and half feet, she sought the still bellowing form of her "father" and shouted into the melee.

"Oh, do shut up, Father, and let's be on with it! I've a wedding to be about and you're only delaying it. So what if he didn't come? Can't say that I blame him."

The chapel went deathly still. Adrienne could have sworn she felt the man beside her tremble with suppressed laughter, although she dared not meet his gaze again.

Whispers of "Mad Janet" rebounded through the chapel, and Adrienne felt a surge of relief. This fame for being mad could be useful. So long as she obeyed the Comyn's orders this one day, she could be as odd as a square ball bearing and no one would find it unseemly.

Adrienne had been worried that she wouldn't be able to remember all the details

the Comyn had told her; that she would slip up and someone at her new husband's home would discover she was an impostor. Once she was uncloaked as a charlatan, the Comyn would make good on his threat to kill her.

Suddenly that pressure vanished in a puff of smoke. In the here and now (if she was really here and now) she was crazy Janet Comyn. How could she be held accountable for anything she said or did that didn't make sense? Madness was a license to freedom.

A license to do and say anything she wanted—with no repercussions.

No Eberhard, no guns, no bad memories.

Maybe this place wasn't so bad after all.

CHAPTER 5

ADRIENNE HAD BEEN WANDERING THE GROUNDS OF DALKEITH for several hours when she stumbled upon the smithy. After a grueling two-day ride from Comyn Keep to her new home—Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea—by cantankerous steed, she'd planned to collapse in the nearest soft bed, sleep for days, and then when she woke up (if she was still here) find a good bottle of Scotch and drink herself into oblivion. And then check again to see if she was still here.

Not only hadn't she been able to find a soft bed in the riotous castle, but there had been no Scotch, no sign of a husband, and everyone had summarily ignored her. Made it awfully hard to feel at home. Grimm had made haste from her company the moment they'd entered the pink granite walls of the Douglas keep, although he'd seemed quite the gentleman during the journey.

But she was no fool. She didn't have to be hit in the head with a stick to figure out that she was definitely not a wanted wife. Wed by proxy, no welcome, and no sign of a husband. Definitely not wanted.

Adrienne gave up her fruitless search for husband, bed, and bottle and went for a stroll to explore her new home.

And so it was quite by accident that she stumbled through the rowan trees and upon the forge at the edge of the forest. Upon the man, clad only in a kilt, pumping the bellows and shaping the steel of a horseshoe.

Adrienne had heard that her husband by proxy was too beautiful to be borne, but this man indeed rendered the magnificent Grimm a veritable toad.

There just wasn't this much raw man around in the twentieth century, she thought in helpless fascination as she watched him work. To see this kind of man in the twentieth century, a woman had to somehow gain entry to that inner sanctum of dumbbells and free weights, where the man was defining his body in homage to himself. But in this century such a man existed by simple force of nature.

His world demanded that he be strong to survive, to command, to endure.

When the smithy twisted and swooped to switch hammers, she saw a rivulet of

sweat which had beaded at his brow run down his cheek, drop with a splatter to his chest, and trickle, oh, so slowly along the thick ridges of muscle in his abdomen. To his navel, to the top of his kilt, and lower still. She eyed his legs with fascination, waiting to see the drops of sweat reappear on those powerful calves, and wondering deliriously about every inch in between.

So intense was the shimmering heat from the forge, so strange her need, that Adrienne didn't realize he had stopped for several moments.

Until she raised her eyes from his chest to meet his dark, unsmiling eyes.

She gasped.

He crossed the distance and she knew she should run. Yet she also knew that she couldn't have run if her life depended on it. Something about his eyes...

His hand was rough when it closed upon her jaw, forcing her head back to meet him eye to flashing silver eye.

"Is there a service I might perform for you, my fair queen? Perhaps you have something in need of a heated shaping and molding? Or perhaps I might reshape my steel lance in the heat of your forge, milady?"

Her eyes searched his face wildly. *Composure*, she commanded herself.

He shook her ruthlessly. "Do you seek my services?"

"It's the heat, nothing more," she croaked.

"Aye, 'tis most assuredly the *heat*, beauty." His eyes were devilish. "Come." He took her by the hand and started off at a fast pace.

"No!" She swatted at his arm.

"Come," he ordered, and she suffered the uncanny sensation that he was reaching inside her with those eyes and reordering her will to match his will. It terrified her.

"Release me!" she gasped.

His eyes searched deeper, and although she knew it was crazy, Adrienne felt as if

she was fighting for something terribly important here. She knew she must not go with this man, but she couldn't begin to say why. She sensed danger, dark and primeval. Unnatural and ancient danger beyond her control. If he opened his cruelly beautiful mouth and said *come* one more time, she might do just that.

He opened his mouth. She braced herself for the command she knew would follow.

"Release my wife," commanded a deep voice behind them.

CHAPTER 6

SO THIS MAN AT THE FORGE WAS NOT HER HUSBAND. Dear God in heaven, what was she going to find when she turned around? Dare she?

She turned slightly, as if a small sidewise peek might be safer. Might minimize the impact. Adrienne soon discovered just how wrong she was. *Nothing* could minimize *that* man's impact.

Valhalla on the right. Paradise regained on the left.

Stuck between a Godiva truffle and a chocolate eclair.

Between a rock and a very hard place. Two very hard places from the looks of it. *I hate beautiful men*, she mourned soulfully. *Hate them. Hate them. Hate them.* Yet to resist ____

Hands clasped her waist from behind as the smithy pulled her back against his sculpted body.

"Let go of me!" she cried, the strange fog lifting from her brain.

The smithy released her.

And that very big, beautiful man facing her—the legendary Hawk—was glaring like Odin preparing to zap her with a thunderbolt. She snorted.

"Don't glare at *me*. You didn't even bother to show up at our wedding." Adrienne started pacing. If she really was Janet, how would Janet have felt? How terrible to be wed away like a piece of property and then be treated so shabbily by the new in-laws! "I spend two miserable soggy days on the back of a nag and does it ever stop raining in this godawful place? Two days it took us to get here!

Gracious Grimm dumps me the minute we set foot on Dalkeith. *You* don't even bother to greet me. Nobody shows me to a room. Nobody offers me anything to eat. Or drink for that matter." She paused in her litany and leaned back against a tree, hands on her hips, one foot tapping. "And then, since I can't find anyplace to sleep that I'm not afraid doesn't belong to someone else, I go off wandering until you finally bother yourself enough to show up and now you glare at me? Well, I'll have you know—"

"Silence, lass."

"That I am *not* the kind of woman that one can push to the side and have her take it docilely. I know when I'm not wanted—

"You're most assuredly wanted," the smithy purred.

"I don't need to be hit over the head with a ton of rocks—"

"I said be silent."

"And I didn't get even one wedding present!" she added, proud that she had thought of that. Yes, Janet would certainly have been offended.

"Silence!" Hawk roared.

"And I don't take orders! Ummmph!" Adrienne grunted as her husband lunged the distance separating them and tumbled her to the ground. Once she hit the earth with what felt like a small rhinoceros on top of her, he rolled her over several times, locked in the curve of his arm. She could hear the blacksmith cursing softly, then the sound of running feet, as she struggled mightily against his steely embrace.

"Be still!" Hawk growled, his breath warm against her ear. It took her a few moments to realize that he was holding her almost protectively, as if shielding her with his body. Adrienne raised her head to see his dark eyes scanning the forest's edge intently.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, her heart hammering. From being tumbled so roughly, she assured herself, not from being cradled in this man's powerful arms. She squirmed.

"Be still, I said."

She wriggled, partly to spite him and partly to get his leg out from between her thighs, but she only succeeded in ending up with her tush pressed against his—oh dear—surely he didn't walk around like *that* all the time! She jerked sharply at the contact and heard a muffled thud, the sound of bone hitting bone when her head struck his jaw with a *thwack*. He cursed softly, then the rumble of his husky baritone laughter vibrated as his arms tightened around her.

"A wee hellcat, aren't you?" he said in her ear.

She struggled violently. "Let me go!"

But he didn't. He only eased his tight grip enough to turn her around so that she was sprawled atop him, facing him. *Big, big mistake*, she thought mournfully. It presented a whole new array of problems, starting with her breasts being crushed against him, her leg caught between his, and her palms splayed on his muscular chest. His white linen shirt was open and pure male heat rose from his broad chest. There was blood trickling down his arrogantly curved lower lip, and for an insane moment she actually considered licking it off. In one swift, graceful motion he rolled her beneath him and she lost her breath. Her lips parted. She stared in mute fascination and knew in that terrifying instant the man she had married by proxy was about to kiss her and she was quite certain her life would never be the same again if he did.

She snarled. He smiled and lowered his head toward hers.

Just then the blacksmith burst back into the clearing. "Not a damned thing!" he spat. "Whoever it was is gone."

The Hawk jerked away in surprise and Adrienne seized the moment to push against him. She might just as well have tried to push the Sphinx across the sand and into the Nile.

It was only then that Adrienne saw the arrow still quivering in the tree that she had been, moments before, standing directly in front of, soundly berating her new husband. Her eyes widened as she gazed up at the Hawk questioningly. This was all too weird.

"Whom have you offended?" Her husband shook her smartly. "Who seeks to kill you?"

"How do you know it wasn't you they were after, that it wasn't just a bad shot?"

"Nobody wants to kill me, lass."

"From what I hear your last lover tried to do just that," she retorted nastily.

He paled ever so slightly beneath the flawless bronze of his skin.

The blacksmith laughed.

Her neck was getting sore from peering up at him. "Get off me," she growled at her husband.

She wasn't prepared when the Hawk's eyes darkened and he rolled over and pushed her from him.

"Though you persist in rejecting me, *wife*, I think you may need me," Hawk said softly.

"I don't think so," she retorted fiercely.

"I'll be here, should you reconsider."

"I'll take my chances. No one shot anything in my direction until you showed up. That makes two attempts that I know of on you, and none on me." She stood up, brushing her gown off. Dirt and nettles stuck to the heavy fabric. She tugged a few leaves from her hair and dusted off her rump until she became aware of an uncomfortable sensation. Slowly she raised her eyes from her clothing to find both men watching her with the intensity of wolves. Large, hungry wolves.

"What?" she snapped.

The blacksmith laughed again. The sound was deep, dark, and mysterious. "Methinks the lady doth not see how sweetly cruel beckons such beauty."

"Spare me," she said tiredly.

"Fair the dawn of yon lass's blush, rich and ripe and deeply lush." Her husband was not about to be outdone.

Adrienne stamped a foot and glared at them both. Where was her Shakespeare when she needed it? "For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright/, who art as black as hell, as dark as night," she muttered.

The smithy threw his head back and roared with laughter. Her husband's lips curved in an appreciative smile at her wit.

Hawk stood then and extended his hand. "Cry peace with me, lass."

Cry. The man could make an angel weep. But she was hungry. Thirsty. Tired. She took his hand, vowing fiercely to take nothing more. Ever.

As her husband guided her from the clearing the smithy's voice followed on a jasmine-scented breeze, and she was surprised that her husband didn't react. Either he was not a possessive man, or he simply hadn't heard. For clearly she heard the smithy say, "Woman who renders all men as weak kittens to cream, I can take you places you've known only in your dreams."

"Nightmares," she grumbled, and heard him laugh softly behind her.

Her husband glanced at her curiously. "What?"

She sighed heavily. "Night's mare rides hard upon my heels. I must sleep soon."

He nodded. "And then we talk."

Sure. If I'm still in this godforsaken place when I wake up.

* * * * *

Sidheach James Lyon Douglas worried his unshaven jaw with a callused hand. Anger? Perhaps. Disbelief, surely. Possessiveness. Where the hell did that come from?

Fury. Aye, that was it. Cold, dark fury was eating him from the inside out and the spirited Scotch was only aiding the ache.

He had stood and watched his new wife with starvation in his eyes. He had seen her suffer raw and primal hunger for a man—and it was not him. Unbelievable.

"Keep drinking like that and we'll never make Uster on the morrow," Grimm warned.

"I'm not going to Uster on the morrow. My wife could be with babe by the time I got back."

Grimm grinned. "She's in a full fury with you, you know."

"She's in a fury with *me*?"

"You were too drunk to wed her, much less bed her, and now you're in a tizzy

because she looked on Adam agreeably."

"Agreeably? Give the lass a trencher and she would have slid it under him, licking her lips as she dined!"

"So?"

"She's my wife."

"Och, this one's getting too deep for me. You said you didn't care what became of her once the deed was done. You swore to honor the pact and you have. So why this foolish ire, Hawk?"

"My wife will not make a cuckold of me."

"I believe a husband can only be a cuckold if he cares. You don't care."

"Nobody *asked* me if I cared."

Grimm blinked, fascinated by the Hawk's behavior. "All the lasses look on Adam like that."

"She didn't even notice me. 'Tis Adam she wants. Who the bloody hell hired that blacksmith anyway?"

Grimm mused into his brew. "Wasn't Thomas the smithy?"

"Come to think of it, aye."

"Where'd Thomas go?"

"I don't know, Grimm. That's why I asked you."

"Well, somebody hired Adam."

"You didn't?"

"Nay. I thought you did, Hawk."

"Nay. Maybe he's Thomas's brother and Thomas was taken ill."

Grimm laughed. "Ugly Thomas his brother? Not a chance on that."

"Get rid of him."

"Adam?"

"Aye."

Silence.

Then, "By the saints, Hawk, you can't be serious! 'Tisna like you to take away a man's livelihood because of the way a lass looks at him..."

"This lass happens to be my wife."

"Aye—the very one you didn't want."

"I've changed my mind."

"Besides, he's been keeping Esmerelda quite content, Hawk."

Sidheach sighed deeply. "There is that." He paused the length of several jealous heartbeats. "Grimm?"

"Urn?"

"Tell him to keep his clothes on while he works. And that's an order."

* * * * *

But Hawk couldn't leave it alone. His mind became aware of where his feet had taken him just as he entered the amber rim of firelight beneath the rowan trees at Adam's forge.

"Welcome Lord Hawk of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea."

Hawk spun about to come nose to nose with the glistening blacksmith, who had somehow managed to get behind him. Not many men could take the Hawk by surprise, and for an instant Hawk was as fascinated as he was irritated with the smithy.

"I didn't hire you. Who are you?"

"Adam," the smithy replied coolly.

"Adam what?"

The smithy pondered, then flashed a puckish smile. "Adam Black."

"Who hired you?"

"I heard you were in need of a man to tend a forge."

"Stay away from my wife." Hawk was startled to hear the words leave his lips. *By the saints, he sounded like a jealous husband!* He had intended to push the question of who had hired the smithy, but apparently he was no more in control of his words than he had been of his feet; at least not where his new wife was concerned.

Adam laughed wickedly. "I won't do a thing the lady doesn't want me to do."

"You won't do a thing *I* don't want you to do."

"I heard the lady didn't *want you*."

"She will."

"And if she doesn't?"

"All the lasses want me."

"Funny. I have just the same problem."

"You're uncanny rude for a smithy. Who was your laird before?"

"I have known no man worthy to call master."

"Funny, smithy. I have just the same problem."

The men stood nose to nose. Steel to steel.

"I can order you from my land," Hawk said tightly.

"Ah, but then you'd never know if she would choose you or me, would you? And I suspect there is this deep kernel of decency in you, a thing that cries out for old-fashioned mores like fairness and chivalry, honor and justice. Foolish Hawk. All the knights will soon be dead, as dust of dreams passing on time's fickle

fancy."

"You're insolent. And as of this moment, you're unemployed."

"You're afraid," the smithy marveled.

"Afraid?" The Hawk echoed incredulously. This fool smithy dared stand on his land and tell him that he, the legendary Hawk, was afraid? "I fear nothing. Certainly not you."

"Yes you do. You saw how your wife looked at me. You're afraid you won't be able to keep her hands off me."

A bitter, mocking smile curved Hawk's lip. He was not a man given to self-deception. He *was* afraid he wouldn't be able to keep his wife away from the smithy. It galled him, incensed him, and yet the smithy was also right about his underlying decency. Decency that demanded, as Grimm had suspected, that he not deprive a man of his livelihood because of his own insecurity about his wife. The Hawk suffered the rare handicap of being noble, straight to the core. "Who are you, really?"

"A simple smithy."

Hawk studied him in the moonlight that dappled through the rowans. Nothing simple here. Something tugged at his mind, drifting on a scent of memory, but he couldn't pin it down. "I know you, don't I?"

"You do now. And soon, she will know me as well."

"Why do you provoke me?"

"You provoked me first when you pleased my queen." The words were spat as the smithy turned away sharply.

Hawk searched his memory for a queen he had pleased. No names came to mind; but they usually didn't. Still, the man had made his game clear. Somewhere, sometime, Hawk had turned a woman's head from this man. And the man was now to play the same game with him. With his wife. A part of him tried not to care, but from the moment he'd laid eyes on Mad Janet this day he'd known he was in trouble for the first time in his life. Deep, over his head, for had

her flashing silver eyes coaxed him into quicksand, he would willingly have gone.

What do you say to a man whose woman you've taken? There was nothing to say to the smithy. "I had no intention to give offense," Hawk offered at last.

Adam spun around and his smile gleamed much too brightly. "Offense to defense, all's fair in lust. Do you still seek to send me hence?"

Hawk met his gaze for long moments. The smithy was right. Something in him cried out for justice. Fair battles fought on equal footing. If he couldn't hold a lass, if he lost her to another man... His pride blazed hot. If his wife left him, whether he had wanted her to begin with or not, and for a smithy at that, well, the legend of the Hawk would be sung to a vastly different rune.

But worse even than that, if he dismissed the smithy tonight, he would never know for certain if his wife would have chosen him over Adam Black. And it mattered. The doubt would torment him eternally. The image of her as she'd stood today, leaning against a tree, staring at the smithy—ah! That would give him nightmares even in Adam's absence.

He would allow the smithy to stay. And tonight the Hawk would seduce his wife. When he was completely convinced where her affections rested, well, maybe *then* he might dismiss the bastard.

Hawk waved a hand dispassionately. "As you will. I will not command your absence."

"As I will. I like that," Adam Black replied smugly.

* * * * *

Hawk walked through the courtyard slowly, rubbing his head that still ached from a bout of drunkenness three nights past. The troth King James had commanded was satisfied. Hawk had wed the Comyn's daughter and thus fulfilled James's final decree. Dalkeith was safe once again.

The Hawk had high hopes that out of sight was truly out of mind, and that King James would forget about Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea. All those years he'd done James's twisted bidding to the letter, only to have the king demand more of him, until by royal decree James had taken from the Hawk his last claim to freedom.

Why had it surprised him? For fifteen years the king had delighted in taking his choices away, whittling them down to the single choice of obeying his king or dying, along with his entire clan.

He recalled the day James had summoned him, only three days before his service was to end.

Hawk had presented himself, his curiosity piqued by the air of tense anticipation that pervaded the spacious throne room. Attributing it to yet another of James's schemes—and hoping it had naught to do with him or Dalkeith—Hawk approached the dais and knelt.

"We have arranged a marriage for you," James had announced when the room quieted.

Hawk stiffened. He could feel the eyes of the courtiers resting on him heavily; with amusement, with mockery and a touch of...pity?

"We have selected a most suitable"—James paused and laughed spitefully—"wife to grace the rest of your days at Dalkeith."

"Who?" Hawk allowed himself only the one word. To say more would have betrayed the angry denial simmering in his veins. He couldn't trust himself to speak when every ounce of him screamed defiance.

James smiled and motioned Red Comyn to approach the throne, and Hawk nearly roared with rage. Surely not the notorious Mad Janet! James wouldn't force him to wed the mad spinster Red Comyn kept in his far tower!

The corner of James's lip twisted upward in a crooked smile. "We have chosen Janet Comyn to be your bride, Hawk Douglas."

Soft laughter ripped through the court. James rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"No!" The word escaped Hawk in a burst of air; too late, he tried to suck it back in.

"No?" James echoed, his smile chilled instantly. "Did We just hear you refuse Our command?"

Hawk trained his eyes on the floor. He took a deep breath. "Nay, my king. I fear I did not express myself clearly." Hawk paused and swallowed hard. "What I meant was 'no, you've been too good to me already.' " The lie burned his lips and left the taste of charred pride on his tongue. But it kept Dalkeith safe.

James chuckled, grandly amused by the Hawk's quick capitulation as he enjoyed anything that showcased the extent of his kingly powers. The Hawk reflected bitterly that once again James held all the cards.

When James spoke again, his voice dripped venom. "Fail to wed the Comyn's daughter, Hawk Douglas, and We will wipe all trace of Douglas from Scotia. Not one drop of your bloodline will survive unless you do this thing."

It was the same threat James had always used to control Hawk Douglas, and the only one that could have been so ruthlessly effective, over and over again.

Hawk bowed his head to hide his anger.

He'd wanted to choose his own wife. Was that so much to ask? During his fifteen years of service the thought of choosing a woman of his own, of returning to Dalkeith and raising a family far from the corruption of James's court, had kept his dreams alive despite the king's efforts to sully and destroy them, one by one. Although the Hawk was no longer a man who believed in love, he did believe in family and clan, and the thought of spending the rest of his days with a fine woman, surrounded by children, appealed to him immensely.

He wanted to stroll the seaside and tell stories to his sons. He wanted lovely daughters and grandchildren. He wanted to fill the nursery at Dalkeith. *Och, the nursery*, the thought stung him; this new realization more bitter and painful than anything the king had ever done to him. *I can never fill the nursery now—not if my wife bears seeds of madness!*

There would be no wee ones—at least not legitimate ones—for the Hawk. How could he bear never holding a child of his own?

Hawk had never spoken of his desire for a family; he'd known that if James found out, he'd eradicate any hope of it. Well, somehow James had either found out or had decided that since he hadn't been able to have the wife he wanted, neither could the Hawk.

"Raise your head and look at Us, Hawk," James commanded.

Hawk raised his head slowly and fixed the king with lightless eyes.

James studied him then turned his brilliant gaze on Red Comyn and appended a final threat to ensure cooperation, "We will destroy the Comyn, too, should this decree be defied. Hear you what We say, Red Comyn? Don't fail Us."

Laird Comyn appeared oddly disturbed by James's command.

Kneeling before James's court, the Hawk subdued the last of his rebellious thoughts. He acknowledged the pitying stares of the soldiers with whom he'd served; the sympathy of Grimm's gaze; the complacent hatred and smug mockery of lesser lords who'd long resented the Hawk's success with women, and accepted the fact that he would marry Janet Comyn even if she was a toothless, ancient, deranged old crone. Hawk Douglas would always do whatever it took to keep Dalkeith and all her people safe.

The gossip mill had churned out endless stories of Janet Comyn, a crazed spinster, imprisoned because she was incurably mad.

As Hawk trod the cobbled walkway to the entrance of Dalkeith, he laughed aloud at the false image he'd created in his mind of Mad Janet. He realized that James had obviously known no more about her than anyone else, because James never would have bound the Hawk to such a woman had he known what she was truly like. She was too beautiful, too fiery. James had intended Hawk to suffer, and the only way a man would suffer around this woman was if he couldn't get his hands on her, if he couldn't taste her kisses and enjoy her sensual promise.

Hawk had expected nothing like the shimmering, silken creature of passionate temperament he'd found at the forge. He'd sent Grimm on the last day to wed the lass by proxy, fully intending to ignore her when she arrived. He'd made it clear that no one was to welcome her. Life would go on at Dalkeith as if nothing had changed. He'd decided that if she was half as mad as the gossips claimed, she probably wouldn't even be able to understand that she *was* married. He'd concluded he could surely find some way to deal with her, even if it meant confining her somewhere, far from Dalkeith. James had ordered him to wed, he had said nothing about sharing living quarters.

Then, he'd laid eyes upon "Mad" Janet Comyn. Like an impassioned goddess she'd flayed him with her words, evidencing wit handfasted to unearthly beauty. No las he could recall had stirred in him the tight, clenching hunger he'd suffered when he'd caressed her with his eyes. While she'd been caressing that damned smithy with hers.

The gossips couldn't have been more wrong. Had the Hawk been left to choose a woman for himself, the qualities Janet possessed—independence, a quick mind, a luscious body, and a strong heart—were all qualities he would have sought.

Perhaps, Hawk mused, life might just take a turn for the better after all.

CHAPTER 7

ADRIENNE KNEW SHE WAS DREAMING. SHE WAS HOPELESSLY in the same horrible nightmare she'd been having for months; the one in which she fled down dark, deserted New Orleans alleys trying to outrun death.

No matter how hard she tried to control the dream, she never made it to safety. Inevitably, Eberhard cornered her in the abandoned warehouse on Blue Magnolia Lane. Only one thing differed significantly from the reality Adrienne had lived through—in her nightmare she didn't make it to the gun in time.

She awoke shaking and pale, with little beads of sweat dappling her face.

And there was the Hawk; sitting on the end of her bed, silently watching her.

Adrienne stared wide-eyed at him. In her sleepy confusion the Hawk's darkly beautiful face seemed to bear traces of Eberhard's diabolic beauty, making her wonder what difference there was between the two men—if any. After a nightmare about one attractive deadly man, waking up to find another in such close proximity was just too much for her frazzled nerves. Although she still had virtually no memory of how she'd come to be in the sixteenth century, her other memories were regrettably intact. Adrienne de Simone remembered one thing with excruciating clarity—she did not trust and did not like beautiful men.

"You screamed," the Hawk informed her in his mellifluous voice.

Adrienne rolled her eyes. Could he do something besides purr every time he opened his perfect mouth? That voice could sweet-talk a blind nun out of her chastity. "Go away," she mumbled.

He smiled. "I came but to see that you weren't the victim of another murder attempt."

"I told you it wasn't *me* they were after." He sat carefully, seemingly caught in a mighty internal struggle. Her mind spun with unchecked remnants of her nightmare as a soft breeze wafted in the open window and kissed her skin. Ye gods, her skin! She plucked the silk sheet to her nearly bare breasts in a fit of pique. The dratted gown she'd found neatly placed on her bed—by someone who

obviously had fewer inhibitions about clothing than she—scarcely qualified as sleepwear. The tiny sleeves had slipped down over her shoulders while the skirt of the gown had bunched up; yards of transparent fabric pooled in a filmy froth around her waist, barely covering her hips—and that only if she didn't move at all. Adrienne tugged firmly at the gown, trying to rearrange it without relinquishing her grip on the sheet.

Hawk groaned, and the husky sound made her every nerve dance on end. She forced herself to meet his heated gaze levelly.

"Janet, I know we didn't exactly start this marriage under the best of circumstances."

"Adrienne. And one could definitely say that."

"No, my name is Sidheach. My brother is Adrian. But most call me Hawk."

"I meant me. Call me Adrienne." At his questioning look she added, "My middle name is Adrienne, and it's the one I prefer." A simple, tiny lie. She couldn't hope to keep answering to Janet, she was bound to slip eventually.

"Adrienne," he purred, putting the inflection on it as *Adry-EN*. "As I was saying"—he slid along the bed with such grace that she only realized he'd moved when he was much too close—"I fear we didn't get the best start, and I intend to remedy that."

"You can remedy it by removing yourself from my sight this instant. Now. Shoo." She clutched the sheet in a careful fist and waved her other hand dismissively. He watched it with fascination. When he didn't move, she tried to dismiss him again, but he snared her hand mid-wave.

"Beautiful hands," he murmured, turning it palm up and planting a lingering kiss in the sensitive center. "I feared Mad Janet was a most uncomely shrew. Now I know why the Comyn kept you hidden in his tower all those years. You are the true silver and gold in the Comyn treasure trove. His wealth has been depleted in full measure by the loss of you."

"Oh, get off it," she snapped, and he blinked in surprise. "Listen Sidhawk or Hawk or whoever you are, I'm not impressed. If we're going to be forced to suffer the same roof above our heads we need to get a few things straight."

First"—she held up a hand, ticking off the fingers as she went—"I don't like you. Get used to that. Second, I didn't want to marry you, but I had no alternative—"

"You desire another." The purr deepened into a rumble of displeasure.

"Third," she continued without bothering to respond, "I don't find your manly wiles even remotely intriguing. You're not my type..."

"But Adam certainly is, eh?" His jaw clenched and his ebony eyes flashed.

"More so than you," she lied, thinking that if she could convince him she meant it, he might leave her alone.

"You won't have him. You are *my* wife, whether you like it or not. I will not be made a cuckold—"

"You have to *care* to be made a cuckold."

"Perhaps I could." Perhaps he already did and he didn't have the first inkling why.

"Well, I can't."

"Am I so displeasing then?"

"Yes."

He stared. Gazed about the room. Studied the rafters. No mysterious answer was hovering anywhere to be found.

"The lasses have always found me most comely," he said finally.

"Maybe that's part of your problem."

"Pardon?"

"I don't like your attitude."

"My attitude?" he echoed dumbly.

"Right. So get thee from my bed and from my sight and speak no more to me this night."

"You're the damnedest lass I've ever met."

"And you're the most shallow, incorrigible knave of a man I've ever had the displeasure of meeting."

"Where do you get all these ideas of me?" he wondered.

"We could start with you being too drunk to show up at your own wedding."

"Grimm told you? Grimm wouldn't have told you that!"

"A pox on male bonding." Adrienne rolled her eyes. "All he would tell me was that you were tending to an uprising. Of your stomach, I hadn't guessed. The maid who showed me to this room earlier had a fine time telling me. Went on and on about how you and three casks of wine and three women spent the week before our wedding trying to... you know"—Adrienne muttered an unintelligible word—"your brains out."

"To *what* my brains out?"

"You know." Adrienne rolled her eyes.

"I'm afraid I don't. What was that word again?"

Adrienne looked at him sharply. Was he teasing her? Were his eyes alight with mischief? That half-smile curving his beautiful mouth could absolutely melt the sheet she was clutching, not to mention her will. "Apparently one of them succeeded, because if you had any brains left you'd get out of my sight *now*," she snapped.

"It wasn't three." Hawk swallowed a laugh. "No?"

"It was five."

Adrienne's jaw clenched. She held her fingers up again. "Fourth—this will be a marriage in name only. Period."

"Casks of wine, I meant."

"You are *not* funny."

His laughter rolled dangerous and heavy. "Enough. Now we're going to count the

Hawk's rules." He held up his hand and began ticking fingers off. "First, you're my wife, thusly you'll obey me in all things. If I must command you to my bed, then so be it. Second"—his other hand rose and she flinched, half expecting to be hit, but he cupped her face firmly and glared into her eyes—"you will stay away from Adam. Third, you'll give all pretense of being delighted to be married to me—both publicly and privately. Fourth, fifth, and sixth, you'll stay away from Adam. Seventh"—he yanked her from the bed and to her feet in one swift motion—"you'll explain precisely what you find so displeasing about me, *after* I make love to you, and eighth, we're going to have children. Many. Perhaps dozens. Perhaps I'll simply keep you fat with child from this moment forth."

Adrienne's eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke. By the time he got to the children part she was nearing a full panic. She gathered her scattered wits and searched for the most effective weapon. What could she say to keep this man at bay? His ego. His gargantuan ego and manly pride. She had to use it.

"Do what you will. I'll simply think on Adam." She stifled a yawn and studied her cuticles.

Hawk stepped back, dropping his hands from her body as if burned. "You'll simply think on Adam!"

He rubbed his jaw, not quite believing what he'd heard while he stared at the vision before him, half clad in a cloud of transparent froth. Silver-blond hair tumbled around the most beautiful face he had ever beheld. Her face was heart-shaped, her jaw delicate yet surprisingly strong. Her lips were full and velvety plum-rich, and she had spitting silver-gray eyes. She was passion breathing, and she didn't seem to have a clue about her own beauty. Or she didn't care. Lust clenched a fist hard around him and squeezed. His ebony eyes narrowed intently. She had creamy skin, beautiful shoulders, a slim waist, sweet flare of hips and legs that climbed all the way up to heaven. Her beauty branded him, claimed him. The lass was sheer perfection. Although the

Hawk was not a superstitious man, the words of Grimm's wish on the falling star chose that moment to resurface in his mind. *What exactly had Grimm said?*

He'd wished for the Hawk to meet a woman with "wit and wisdom"; an intelligent woman.

"Can you do sums?" he snapped.

"I keep ledgers like a pro."

"Do you read and write?" he pushed.

"Three languages fluently, two reasonably well." It was the primary reason she could fake their brogue so well and convince them she *was* Mad Janet Comyn. Although some of the words and expressions she used might seem odd to them—they did expect her to be batty—she'd been a quick study at the Comyn keep, assimilating a burr with the ease of a child. She'd always had an ear for languages. Besides, she'd watched every episode of *The Highlander* ever made.

Hawk groaned. The second part of Grimm's wish had been that the woman be perfect of face and form. He need ask no questions on that score. She was a Venus, unadorned, who'd slipped into his world, and he had a nagging premonition that his world might never be the same again.

So, the first two requirements for which Grimm had wished were met. The woman possessed both brains and bewitching beauty.

It was the last requirement Grimm had specified that concerned Hawk the most: *A perfect "no" on her perfect lips...*

The woman didn't live and breathe who'd ever said no to the Hawk.

"Lass, I want you," he said in a raw, husky voice. "I will make the most incredible love to you you'll ever experience this side of Valhalla. I can take you beyond paradise, make you wish to never set your feet upon this ground again. Will you let me take you there? Do you want me?" He waited, but he was already certain of what was to come.

Her lips pursed in a luscious pucker as she said, "No."

* * * * *

"You've laid a *geis* upon me with your bloody wish, Grimm!" Laird Sidheach James Lyon Douglas was heard to howl to the starless heavens later that night. Beyond a circle of rowan trees Adam stoked a bank of embers and made a sound a shade too dark to be laughter.

* * * * *

Adrienne sat in the darkness on the edge of her bed for a long time after he'd left, and flinched at his husky howl that rose to touch the moon. A *geis*? A curse. Bah! She was the one cursed.

To him, she was just like all the rest, and the one thing Adrienne de Simone had learned was that where a man was concerned she couldn't tolerate being one of all the rest.

Guilty as the legions who'd fallen before her, she wanted this man called the Hawk. Wanted him with an unreasoning hunger that far surpassed her attraction to the smithy. There'd been something almost frightening about the smithy's eyes. Like Eberhard's. But the Hawk had beautiful dark eyes with flecks of gold dusting them beneath thick sooty lashes. Hawk's eyes hinted at pleasures untold, laughter, and if she wasn't imagining it, some kind of past pain held in careful check.

Right, she told herself caustically. *The pain of not having enough time to make love to all the beautiful women in the world. You know what he is. A womanizer. Don't do this to yourself again. Don't be a fool, Adrienne.*

But she couldn't shake the discomfort she'd felt each time she'd forced herself to say cruel and hateful things to him. That perhaps he didn't deserve them. That just because the Hawk was a dark and beautiful man like Eberhard didn't mean he was the same kind of man as Eberhard. She had a nagging feeling that she was being unfair to him, for no logical reason whatsoever.

Ah, but there is a logical explanation for how and why you've suddenly vaulted back from 1997 to 1513? She snorted derisively.

Adrienne had learned to examine facts and deal with reality, regardless of how irrational the immediate reality appeared to be. New Orleans born and raised, she understood that human logic couldn't explain everything. Sometimes there was a larger logic at work—something tantalizingly beyond her comprehension. Lately, Adrienne felt more surprised when things made sense than when they didn't—at least when things were odd she was on familiar territory. Despite its being highly illogical and utterly improbable, all five of her senses insisted that she wasn't exactly in Kansas anymore.

A dim memory teased the periphery of her mind... What had she been doing just

before she'd found herself on the Comyn's lap? The hours before were hazy, uncertain. She could recall the uneasy feeling of being watched... and what else? An odd scent, rich and spicy, that she smelled just before she'd... what? Adrienne pushed hard against a blanket of confusion and succeeded only in making her head throb.

She struggled with it a moment, then yielded to the pain. Adrienne muttered a fervent prayer that the larger logic behind this irrational reality treat her with more benevolence than whatever had thrown Eberhard her way.

Too bad she hadn't lost some of those really, really bad memories. But no, just a few strange hours; a short gap of time. Perhaps the shock of what had occurred was muting her memory for now. But surely as she adjusted to this new environment she would figure out just how she'd managed to travel through time. And figure out how to get back.

But then she wondered, did she really want to get back to what she'd left behind?

* * * * *

In the morning, Adrienne splashed icy water on her face and assessed herself in the blurry polished silver disc hanging above the basin. Ah, the little luxuries. Hot water. Toothpaste. What did she pine for the most?

Coffee. Surely somewhere in the world someone was growing coffee in 1513. If her luscious husband was so anxious to please, perhaps he would find it for her—and quickly. She'd need a full carafe every morning if she continued to lose sleep like this.

By the time the Hawk had left her room last night she'd been shaking from head to toe. The lure of the smithy was but a dim echo of the pull the man called Hawk had on all her senses. Just being in his presence made her feel quivery inside and weak at the knees—far worse than Adam had. She snorted as she recalled the Hawk's rules. Four of them had been to stay away from the smithy. Well, that was one sure way to irritate him if she felt like it. After she got her coffee.

Adrienne rummaged through Janet's "trousseau" seeking something reasonably simple to wear. Donning a lemon-yellow gown (how did they make these brilliant fabrics in this age?), she accented it with a gold girdle at the waist and

several gold arm cuffs she found. Soft leather slippers for her feet and a shake of her silvery mane and coffee assumed the priority of breathing.

* * * * *

"Coffee," she croaked when she'd finally managed to wind her way through the sprawling castle and find several people enjoying a leisurely breakfast. There were a dozen or so seated at the table, but the only ones Adrienne recognized were Grimm and Him, so she issued the word in their general direction hopefully.

Everyone at the table stared at her.

Adrienne stared back unblinkingly. She could be rude too.

"I think she said coffee," Grimm suggested after a long pause, "although I've heard more intelligible sounds from some of our falcons."

Adrienne rolled her eyes. Morning always lent a husky quality to her brandy-rich voice. "I need coffee," she explained patiently. "And my voice is always like this in the morning."

"A voice to cherish, smooth and complex as the finest malt Scotch," the Hawk purred. His eyes lingered on her face, then slid gently down to her toes. How in God's name could a mere look make her feel as if he'd peeled her gown from her body slowly and deliciously?

"Didn't that fellow from Ceylon leave a store of odd things in the buttery? And I'm Lydia Douglas, by the bye, this rascal's—"

"Mother—"

"Hush. You botched the wedding and you're making a fine mess of things now, so just hush."

Adrienne forgave him for almost everything at that moment, because he looked like a small boy as he blinked in silence. "My lady," she said, attempting a curtsy and hoping she'd addressed Hawk's mother correctly because she liked the woman instinctively, even if she had given birth to that overbearing womanizer.

"Lydia is fine, and if I may—Adrienne? Hawk told me it's your address of

preference."

"Adrienne is wonderful. Coffee?"

Lydia laughed, obviously unabashed by this single-minded obsession. "I take it you're used to having the strong brew of a morn. My healer tells me it has rejuvenating properties and is a natural energizer."

"Yes." Adrienne nodded vehemently.

"The buttery, Hawk," Lydia encouraged her son.

"You're going to let me go?" he asked caustically.

"Since when do you listen to me?" Lydia asked with a twinkle in her eye. "Take your new wife to find her coffee. And Adrienne, if you need aught else, even a commiserating ear, do find me. I spend much of the day in my gardens. Anyone can point you the way."

"Thank you." Adrienne meant it from the bottom of her heart. How nice it was to have someone extend a friendly welcome! Someone not male and beautiful beyond endurance.

"Come." The Hawk extended a hand to her. Refusing to touch him, she said sweetly, "After you."

"Nay, lass, after you." He motioned. He'd follow the sweet curve of her hips past the horned minions of hell.

"I must insist," Adrienne demurred.

"As must I," he countered.

"Go," she snapped.

He folded his powerful arms across his chest and resolutely met her gaze.

"Oh, for God's sake, do we have to fight about this, too?"

"Not if you obey me, lass."

Behind them Lydia half laughed, half groaned. "Why don't the two of you just

walk side by side," she said encouragingly.

"Fine," Adrienne snapped.

"Fine," the Hawk snarled.

* * * * *

Lydia laughed until tears twinkled in her merry green eyes. Finally—a lass worthy of her son.



CHAPTER 8

SIDE BY SIDE. SHE DIDN'T HAVE TO LOOK AT HIM. *THANK GOD for small favors.*

"And here we have the buttery," the Hawk said as he unlocked the door and pushed it open. Adrienne's spirits rose. Her nose twitched delicately. She could smell coffee beans, spices, teas, all manner of wonderful things. She practically vaulted into the room, the Hawk at her heels. As she was about to plunge a hand deep into the woven brown sack from which issued the most delicious aroma of sinfully dark coffee, the Hawk somehow managed to insinuate himself between Adrienne and her prize.

"It would seem you quite like your coffee," he observed, with too keen an interest for her liking.

"Yes." She shifted her weight from foot to foot, impatiently, but the man had a lot of body to block her way with. "Move, Hawk," she complained, and he laughed softly as he gripped her waist with his big hands, nearly circling it.

Adrienne froze as a scent even more compelling than her beloved coffee tantalized her nostrils. Scent of leather and man. Of power and sexual prowess. Of confidence and virility. Scent of everything she'd imagined in her dreams.

"Ah, my heart, there is a price—" he murmured.

"You have no heart," she informed his chest.

"True," he agreed. "You've thieved it. And last night I stood before you in agony whilst you ripped it asunder—"

"Oh give over—"

"You have odd sayings, my heart—"

"Your heart is a puny black walnut. Wizen. Shriveled." She refused to look up at him.

He laughed. "Lass, you will keep me amused long into my twilight years."

"Coffee," she muttered.

"The toll troll must be reckoned with."

"And just what does the toll troll wish?"

"This morn,'tis simple. Other days it may not be. Today your coffee will cost you only a wee kiss."

"You think to dole out the coffee to me in return for kisses?" she exclaimed, disbelieving. And in spite of herself she tilted her head back and met his gaze. Well, almost. Her eyes snagged and held about three inches below his eyes on his perfectly sculpted, beautifully colored lips. A man's lips should not be so well formed and desirable. She forgot about coffee as she thought about tasting him, and her traitorous knees started to get all wobbly again.

"Go ahead," he encouraged.

The bastard. He knew she wanted to kiss him.

"I know you don't want to, lass, but you must if you want your coffee."

"And if I don't?"

"You don't get your coffee." He shrugged. "Really,'tis a wee price to pay."

"I don't think this is quite what your mother had in mind."

He laughed, a dark, sensual purr, and she felt her nipples tighten. God in heaven, he was dangerous. "My mother is half responsible for me, so don't offer her up for sainthood yet, my heart."

"Quit 'my hearting' me. I have a name."

"Aye, and'tis Adrienne Douglas. My *wife*. Be glad I seek only a boon for a boon and don't simply take what's mine by right."

She grabbed his hand quick as lightning and deposited the requisite kiss on it, then flung it back down. "My coffee," she demanded.

The Hawk's dark eyes simmered with impatient sensuality. "Obviously, lass, there is much I need to teach you about kissing."

"I know how to kiss!"

"Oh? Perhaps you should demonstrate again, for if that was your idea of a kiss, I'll have to demand a more generous boon." He smiled at her, his lower lip curving invitingly.

Adrienne closed her eyes to escape the sight of his perfect lips and realized the moment her lids fluttered shut that she'd made a serious tactical error. The Hawk cupped her face with his hands and backed her against the wall, trapping her with his powerful body. Adrienne's eyes sprang open instantly. "I did *not* close my eyes so you would kiss me!" she exclaimed, but her denial lost its force when she met his gaze. His intense ebony eyes scrambled her wits, making her ache to accept the pleasure he offered, but she knew she must not. Adrienne tried to free herself from his grip, but his hands on her face were firm. "Hawk! I don't think—"

"Yes, you do, lass, and entirely too much," he interrupted, his hooded gaze mocking. "So stop thinking for a moment, will you? Just feel." He kissed her swiftly, taking erotic advantage of her lips, which were still parted in mid-protest. Adrienne pushed at his chest, but he paid no heed to her resistance.

The Hawk buried his hands in her hair, tilting her head back to kiss her more deeply, his tongue exploring her mouth. His lips were demanding, his embrace possessive and strong, and when he leaned his hips against her body, he was insistently, undeniably male. He challenged her with his kiss, wordlessly demanding that she acknowledge the tension and heat that existed between them—a heat that was capable of incinerating a tender heart or welding two hearts into one. Desire shuddered through her so intensely that she moaned, confused and afraid. Adrienne knew it was dangerous to enjoy his touch, too risky to permit what could surely become addictive pleasure.

The Hawk's thumb played at the corner of her mouth, pressuring her to surrender completely to his mastery. Aroused, curious, helpless to resist, Adrienne yielded. The kiss he rewarded her with made her tremble; it was a kiss guaranteed to strip away her defenses.

And then where would she be? Vulnerable again—a fool for a beautiful man, again.

Hawk's hands slid from Adrienne's hair to cup her breasts, and the ensuing dampness between her thighs shocked her into awareness of her eroding control. Adrienne jerked, determined not to be just another one of this shameless womanizer's conquests. "Let me go! You said one kiss! This wasn't part of the bargain!"

The Hawk froze. He drew his head back, his strong hands still cupping her breasts, and searched her face intently, almost angrily. Whatever it was he looked for, she could tell he wasn't satisfied. Not satisfied at all.

He scrutinized her wide eyes a moment longer, then turned his broad back to her and scooped out a handful of coffee beans.

Adrienne rubbed irritably at her lips, as if she could brush away the lingering, unforgettable pleasure of his touch. As they exited the buttery and walked down the long corridor in silence, refusing to look at each other, the Hawk wrapped the beans in a cloth and tucked them in his sporran.

Just outside the Greathall he stopped and, as if tethered by a common leash, she halted in her tracks.

"Tell me you felt it," his low voice commanded, and still they didn't look at each other. She studied the floor for dust eddies while he studied the ceiling for cobwebs.

"Felt what?" She barely kept her voice from breaking. *A kiss to build a dream on, big beautiful man?*

He yanked her against his body; undeterred when she averted her face, he lowered his head and scattered kisses upon the high curves of her breasts where they pushed against the scooped neckline of her gown.

"Stop it!"

He raised his head, a snarl darkening his face. "Tell me you felt it too!"

The moment hovered, full of possibilities. It stretched into uncertainty and, in her fear, was lost.

"Me? I was thinking on Adam."

How could a man's eyes change from such burning intensity to such cold flat orbs in less than an instant? How could such an open face become so shuttered? A noble face become so savage?

"The next time you're foolish enough to say that after I touch you, I won't be responsible for my actions, lass."

Adrienne closed her eyes. *Hide it, hide it, don't let him see how he affects you.*
"There won't be a next time you touch me."

"There will be a next time every day, Adrienne Douglas. You belong to me. And I can only be pushed so far. Adam can be sent away. Everyone can be sent away. Coffee can be sent away. I control everything you want. I can be very good to you if you're willing to try. The only thing I can't negotiate about is Adam. So be willing to try with me and all I ask is that you forgo Adam and never say his name to me. If you can grant me that wee boon, I will demand naught else but the price for your coffee each morn. And I promise you I won't make it too high."

The kiss was too high. Too dangerous in itself. "By what right—"

"By might. 'Tis simple enough."

"Brute force—"

"Don't bother trying to guilt me. Ask my mother. It doesn't work."

Well, well. No chivalry here, she noted. But all in all, the deal he offered was more reasonable than the myriad alternatives. He could demand *all* his husbandly prerogatives rather than one small kiss each morning. She could live through it. "A kiss each morning? That's all you seek in return for my not mentioning Adam to you? And I get my coffee every day?"

"Stay away from Adam. Don't let me find you near him. Don't say his name to me."

"For a kiss each morn?" She had to tie this down to the letter of his law.

"For a boon each morn."

"That's not fair! Just what's a boon?"

He laughed. "Who told you life was fair? Who misled you so sorely? And considering that we're wed and the alternative to my kind offer is sharing full conjugal privileges, what right have you to squabble over fair?"

"Well, you could pin it down a little for my peace of mind! Otherwise I'll wake up dreading things unknown."

His face darkened. "I seek to give her carnal pleasure and she'dreads things unknown." Bitterly he turned away.

"I didn't mean it like that—" she started to say, hating the bitter lines set about his eyes. She had put them there. But for her own safety, she had to keep them there, so she broke off quickly.

He didn't hear her anyway, so caught up was he in his dark brood as he stalked away.

Much too late, as he faded out of sight around the corner, she recalled her coffee beans forlornly. They were tucked in that pouch he wore around his hips. And he'd relocked the buttery.

* * * * *

A shower. That was it. What Adrienne wouldn't give for thirty minutes of steam rolling in thick clouds, a rich lather of Aveda soap, shampoos and body oils and a fluffy white towel to dry off with.

She paid careful attention to embellishing the finer nuances of her fantasy shower to keep her mind off Him while she located the gardens. She found them behind the castle; one had to cut through the kitchens to get there, or walk all the way around the castle—and all the way around was a long walk.

"Well, poke in a little more than your wee nose, I'll say. I'd like to be seeing all of our new lady," a voice beckoned from within the kitchen.

Adrienne stepped in curiously. The kitchen was unlike anything she'd imagined existed this far back in time. It was huge, well-designed, and spotless. The central focus of the room was a massive column fireplace that offered an opening on each side, quadrupling the cooking areas. A stone chimney climbed to a vent at the high ceiling. Upon closer inspection, she realized that the kitchen had been built as a freestanding addition to the castle proper, designed to be airy

and well vented. Windows lined the two perimeter walls, counters of gleaming oak circled the entire area, and the floors were of palest gray quarry stone. No rotting foods here, no rodents or bugs, this kitchen vied with her own kitchen back home in the late twentieth century except it didn't have a dishwasher. Stairs descended to larders, pantries were cleverly nooked into alcoves, and beyond the open windows sprawled lush gardens. Upon the sills sat tiny jars of herbs and spices.

"You find our kitchen passing fair?"

Adrienne nodded, awestruck, and turned her attention to the smiling man. He was tall and tanned, with a lean body and forearms that were heavily corded with muscle either from wielding a sword or working with his hands. His dark hair and close-cropped beard were both streaked with silver, and when his clear gray eyes met hers, they sparkled with curiosity and welcome.

"The Hawk designed it himself. From his travels. Said he'd seen wonders to make life far more pleasant, and used them all to better Dalkeith, I'll say."

The laird of the castle had been in the kitchens?

"He cut the counters and built the cabinets himself. Likes to work with wood he does. Busies his hands he says. Though where he finds time is beyond me, I'll say." The man rolled his eyes and folded his hands behind his head, leaning his chair back into a puddle of sunshine that streamed in the window. "Name's Tavis, milady," he offered. "Pleased to be welcoming you."

"I'm Mad Janet," she blurted in response to his kindness.

"Don't know much about mad, but Lydia's taken a liking to you and that's one discriminating woman, I'll say."

Adrienne took another step into the kitchen; her eyes swept the room admiring the simple genius with which it had been designed. Everything tidy and easily accessible.

"Lydia is out back," Tavis encouraged. She's been expecting you for some time now, I'll say." He winked at her. "Don't let these Douglas overwhelm you, milady. Stubborn, opinionated people they are, but hearts of purest gold. You'll not find another like the Douglas in all of Scotia. Welcome, I'll say, and if you

need anything, you've only to come find Tavis of the tannery." He flexed his strong hands. "I still make the softest hides this side of Uster. Perhaps on t'other side too." Pride gleamed in his smile as he shoed her toward the door.

Adrienne stepped into the sunshine and breathed as deeply as she could. Honeysuckle, a beloved scent from her earliest youth. Buttercups sprawled in golden beauty beneath the windows to her right and left. Lavender on the air, rugosa roses, and another earthy rich scent she struggled to identify. She heard the tinkling of water spilling into a basin. A fountain? Following the sound, Adrienne traipsed the stone walkways through towering bushes of rhododendrons, lush anemones, bluebells, and scattered forget-me-nots.

Stone paths shot off in several directions, but the tinkling sound of water drew Adrienne unerringly. The Lady Lydia sat upon the ledge of a stone fountain that rose in four tiers, high above her head. A full-size stone dolphin poised atop the fountain, caught in mid-leap, spouted water from its open snout.

"Magnificent," Adrienne breathed, and Lydia turned to greet her with a welcoming smile.

"My son is quite the inventor." Pride was evident in every gentle line of her face.

"He did this too?" Adrienne grimaced.

"Most of the unusual aspects of Dalkeith are of my son's making. When he traveled he sought the most advanced secrets of civilization to bring back to his people—"

"When he traveled the world seeking beautiful bed-mates," Adrienne interrupted acerbically, recalling the words of the Comyn maids.

Lydia cocked her head, an amused gleam in her eyes. "Is that what they say?"

"Is that what he did?"

"What say you ask him yourself? But think well on this, Adrienne. What would people who didn't know you well say of you?"

"Point taken," Adrienne conceded, hoping Lydia never discovered her colorful past.

"Mad Janet," Lydia observed softly. "You don't seem a bit mad to me. Why did the Comyn keep you locked in that tower?"

Adrienne recited the words he'd pounded into her the day of her wedding. "I was too beautiful to risk his own men seeing. So he said." She added her own words without thinking, "Truth is, I've never felt that way."

Lydia snorted. "Have you never seen a glass?"

"Of course I have. But I still never felt that way."

"Rather like the Hawk, I believe," Lydia remarked. "He told me once that he knew he was good-looking only because of the way women fussed over him. That if women hadn't made such a hubbub, he would have just considered himself reasonably neat and clean—"

"Reasonably neat and clean?" Adrienne said incredulously. "The man is flawless from head to toe! He makes David and the Greek gods and Pan seem all out of proportion. He is raw sex in a bottle, uncorked. And somebody should cork it! He's—*accck!* Bah!" Adrienne spluttered and stuttered as she belatedly realized her words. Lydia was laughing so hard, tears misted her eyes.

When Lydia was able to draw a breath, she gave a pleased sigh. "Well, that's a relief. I wasn't sure you weren't immune. He thinks you are. Don't worry. 'Twill be our wee secret, dear Adrienne, and do come sit beside me so I can tell you how glad I am that you're here. I'm only sorry I wasn't here to give you a proper welcome when you arrived. From what I've heard, they all botched things quite terribly."

Adrienne found herself wanting to rush headlong into the closest thing to mothering arms she'd ever known. Her hardened heart slipped on treacherously thin ice—dare she? Dare she not?

* * * * *

Behind bushes of blood-red rhododendrons a shadow flinched. *I hate her! Hate her!* Esmerelda's hand trembled as she raised the tube, then steadied it sharply. She would dispatch the enemy, and end her torment. She puckered her lips around the mouth of the tube, keeping level the tiny instrument of death. She drew a deep breath and forced a sharp burst of air from tight lips. A tiny dart

erupted from the end of the hollow chute, as small as the stinger of a bee. Esmerelda watched as the dart flew home to embed itself in the pale flesh of Adrienne's neck. She smiled with satisfaction as Adrienne slapped briefly at the wound, as if shooing away an irritating midge. Esmerelda squinted hard—she could see the glistening tail of the dart shine in Adrienne's neck as she spoke to Lydia. Done. The deed was done.

* * * * *

"Where is your husband, Lydia?" Adrienne slapped sharply at her neck.

"Midges? Already?"

"We have our share. 'Tis the reason for the nettings upon the beds during this season. A bit of mint seems to keep them away. I stuff some in my pockets and tuck a leaf or two in my bodice." She offered a few leaves of her own and Adrienne accepted them gratefully. "As to my husband..." Her eyes grew dreamy. "That impossible man left me over thirty years ago. He died right after Hawk was born."

"How?" Adrienne wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. The sun was too hot suddenly.

"'Twas in battle for the king, and in his dying he made a pledge, or so King James said, of fifteen years of his son's life in service to the Crown, in exchange for the king's protection of Dalkeith. In fact, Sidheach's service ended only recently."

Adrienne wrinkled her brow in confusion. Lydia's bright flowers suddenly melted into a dizzying wash of color.

Lydia explained patiently, "Dalkeith is a rich keep. There was no man to protect us when my husband died. I was left with a wee heir of two months. Whether my husband actually made the pledge or James just invented it, I'll never know. I doubt my Douglas would have pledged our son to King James in any manner, but one rarely wins an argument with a king. I wasn't ready to wed again, my grieving for my husband was deep. The king's men protected Dalkeith until I doffed my widow weeds. But James gave us his protection on the condition that the Hawk report to Edinburgh on his eighteenth birthday, for fifteen years of fealty. As he claimed my husband promised him."

"You don't believe your husband pledged the Hawk?" Adrienne asked, her vision growing cloudy. She blinked hard a moment and her vision cleared.

Lydia's lovely face grew pensive, and for a long moment it seemed she might not answer the question at all. Adrienne could see memories flitting across her brow, some good, some obviously painful. "My Douglas was the second offer of marriage I received, Adrienne."

"And the first?" Adrienne asked, trailing her fingertips in the cool, sweet water of the fountain and then dabbing a few droplets at her temples.

"King James."

"Ah! A man scorned."

"Decidedly scorned. And not a bit forgiving. King James had set his mind on me and was not to be dissuaded. It was in my sixteenth summer, and I was at court with your mother, Althea. We both received many offers of marriage that season, and James was one of my most ardent admirers. I didn't take him too seriously, he was, after all, the king. It was only later that I discovered just how serious he was. But it was too late. I had set my mind on the Douglas when I was but a wee lass. And the Douglas, well, let's just say it was short work persuading him." Her green eyes twinkled with fond remembrances.

"So the king hates the Hawk because you turned down his offer of marriage? That seems incredibly childish."

"He is. James was spoiled since the moment he was born. He was coddled and pampered and pandered to endlessly. By the time he was of age to marry, he had been doted on ceaselessly. He had never heard the word *no* in his entire life and had no intention of ever hearing it. He found it simply incomprehensible that a woman would choose to be a mere earl's wife when she could be queen of all Scotland."

Adrienne thought briefly about the royals in her time. How very much one had sacrificed to be princess and one day queen. Lydia had made a wise choice when she'd married for love.

"What truly undid him was that he was foolish enough to announce to his court that I was going to be his queen, even after I'd declined his marriage proposals

on several occasions. I wed my Douglas the day following his 'proclamation,' although we didn't know the king had actually gone so far as to announce his intentions publicly until weeks later, when the news finally reached Dalkeith. My husband said we'd made a powerful enemy that day. But I think neither of us knew how truly vengeful he could be. I suspect there are many things about his service to James that Hawk will never speak of. 'Tis rumored James held threats of destroying Dalkeith over his head unless Hawk obeyed his every whim." Her voice slipped a confidential notch. "Hawk doesn't know it, but I sought audience with James, myself, shortly after I began to hear tales of his servitude. I begged him to relinquish his claim on my son." Lydia's eyes clouded. "He laughed and told me that if I had wed wisely the Hawk would have been the king's *son* instead of the king's servant."

Adrienne rubbed her neck and blinked hard. Her vision was blurring alarmingly and her head was pounding. "Public humiliation," she said thickly. "Never met the man who took it well."

"I believe'tis also why King James ordered the Hawk to wed on his command," Lydia continued softly. "Just another subtle way of prolonging his revenge. I think he felt almost cheated by my husband's death, and I've often wondered what he might have done to us had my husband lived longer. What a bitter man he's become." Lydia shook her head. "I'm glad it was you, Adrienne. The king would hate it if he knew how lovely and how very *not-mad* you really are. You are exactly what the Hawk needs. No timid lass, or simpering addlepate, but a woman with true mettle and depth."

Adrienne flushed with pleasure. The added heat did alarming things to her head. "You said you wed again. Do you have other children?" she asked, trying desperately to hold on to the gist of the conversation.

The smile returned to Lydia's face. "Oh, aye. Adrian and Ilysse. They're in France with my sister, Elizabeth. In her last letter she warned me that Adrian is becoming an incorrigible rogue and she's just about given up on civilizing Ilysse." Lydia laughed. "Ilysse can be a bit high-spirited and unmanageable at times. You would like her."

Adrienne wasn't certain how to take that, so she didn't comment. Besides, she wasn't feeling at all well. Her vision was now double, her stomach a roiling agony, and her mouth felt dry as cotton swabs. She struggled to swallow.

"Wallah hubbah hah?" she croaked.

"Adrienne?" Lydia gazed at her with concern. "Adrienne!"

She placed a hand against the younger woman's forehead. "You're burning up!"

Adrienne groaned as she pitched forward and collapsed on the cobbled walkway.

"Hawk!" Lydia screamed.



CHAPTER 9

"POISON." HAWK'S FACE WAS GRIM AND DARK. HE CAREFULLY studied the tiny dart the aged healer had laid upon the cloth.

"Callabron." The healer combed his fingers through his long white beard and lowered himself into a chair by Adrienne's side.

Hawk groaned. Callabron was not a gentle poison. A vicious and slow toxin, it would cause lingering pain for days before it ended in death by suffocation as the toxin slowly paralyzed the body from the outside in.

The Hawk knew there was no cure. He'd heard of the toxin during his service to King James. It was rumored to have claimed the lives of many royal siblings. When one sought to remove a future king, one took no chances with a poison that might fail. Hawk dropped his head in his hands and rubbed his sore and bleary eyes furiously. The intensity of the heat from the high flames wasn't helping. But the heat would help her, the healer had said. It might break the fever. Still... she would die.

Take me, just leave her unharmed! Hawk wished with all of his heart.

"We can ease her pain. There are things I can give her..." the healer said softly.

"Who?" the Hawk raged, ignoring the old man. "Who would wish to do this? Why kill her? What has she done?"

The healer flinched and squeezed his eyes shut.

In the doorway, Lydia drew a labored breath. " 'Tis Callabron, then?"

"Aye. The skin has blackened around the opening, and those pale green lines streak out from it. 'Tis the deadly bite of Callabron."

"I won't lose her, Hawk," Lydia demanded.

Hawk raised his head slowly from his hands. "Mother." The word was a plea, hopelessness in and of itself. *Mother make it better.* But he knew she couldn't.

"Some say 'tis more humane to end the suffering in the early stages," the healer

offered very softly, not meeting the Hawk's gaze.

"Enough!" the Hawk silenced him with a shout. "If all you can bring is gloom and doom, then get thee gone!"

Pride and indignation stiffened the healer's back. "Milord—"

"Nay! I'll have none of it! We'll not be killing her! She won't be dying!"

"Perhaps the Rom might know of some cure," Lydia suggested softly.

The healer sniffed disdainfully. "I assure you, milady, the *Rom* know nothing of the sort. If I tell you there is no cure, you may rest assured that none could heal her. That vagrant band of cutthroats, cheats, and lightfingers certainly couldn't —" The old healer broke off abruptly at the Hawk's dark look.

"'Tis worth trying," the Hawk agreed with Lydia.

"Milord!" The healer protested vehemently. "The Rom are no more than shabby illusionists! They are—"

"Camping on my land," the Hawk cut him off sternly, "as they have for over thirty seasons, with my blessing, so guard your tongue well, old man. If you're so certain they know nothing, why should you care if they come?"

The healer sneered. "I just don't think wild dancing and chanting and nasty-smelling bits of mummified who-zits and what-zits would be good for my patient," he snapped.

The Hawk snorted. It was obvious the healer knew nothing of the truth about the Rom, the proud band of people who'd fled country after country seeking only the freedom to live as they chose. Like so many who dared to fight for what they believed, they were frequently misunderstood and feared. The gypsy tribe that camped at Dalkeith was a tight community of talented and wise people. Although arguably superstitious, the Hawk had found many of their "instincts" accurate.

But this healer, like so many others, was afraid of what was different and thus condemned it. Ignorance translated into fear, which quickly became persecution. The Hawk leveled a steely glare on the old man and growled, "Anything that

might heal *my wife* would be good for her. I don't care if it's mummified toad brains. Or mummified *healer* brains for that matter."

The healer shut his mouth and signed a quick cross.

The Hawk rubbed his eyes and sighed. The Rom were as good a chance as any. He quickly bade a guard at the door to dispatch a messenger to the camp.

"I think you're making a big mistake, milord—"

"The only mistake being made in this room is you opening your mouth again," Hawk growled.

The healer rose furiously, his ancient joints popping protest. With pursed lips, he removed a stone jar sealed by wax and a tight stopper from inside his overtunic, close to his body. He placed it on the hearth, then with the audacity and temerity often acquired by those who have survived plague, famine, and war to reach an advanced old age, the healer dared to snip, "You might choose to use it when your Rom fail. For fail, they will," before fleeing the room in a flurry of creaking joints and thin flapping limbs.

Hawk shook his head and stared broodingly at the shivering woman on the bed. His wife. His lovely, proud, tempestuous *dying* wife. He felt utterly helpless.

Lydia crossed the room and pulled her son's head into the comfort of her bosom. "Hawk, my sweet Hawk." She murmured those nonsensical sounds only a mother knows.

A long moment passed, then Hawk pulled his head back. If he could offer no comfort to his wife, he would accept no comfort from his mother. "Tell me again exactly what happened in the gardens."

* * * * *

"Come, sweet whore," Adam commanded, and Esmerelda came.

She was beyond redemption now. Esmerelda knew who Adam Black was even as she went to him. Her people had always known, and were accordingly cautious. Particularly when dealing with this one, for to incite his ire, or merely to become the focus of his attention, could be the cup of death for an entire nation. And although such phenomenal power instilled immense terror in

Esmerelda's veins, so too was it an irresistible aphrodisiac.

What had brought him here? she wondered. It was her last coherent thought as he began to do those things to her body that turned her inside-out. His face was dark with passion above her, gilded in the amber glow of fire beneath the rowans. The scent of sandalwood and jasmine rose up from the steaming earth around them. It was wee morn when she was finally able to crawl from his forge.

Adam templed his fingers and considered his strategy as he watched the woman falter from his tent on weak legs.

"Fool!" The word came sharply, harsh and condemning.

Adam stiffened. "You called, my King?" he asked, addressing his unseen master.

"What have you done this time, Adam?"

"I was having my way with a gypsy girl, since you ask. What of it?"

"The beauty lies dying."

"Adrienne?" Adam was startled. "Nay. Not of my hand."

"Well, fix it!"

"Truly, my King, I had nothing to do with it."

"I don't care. Fix it. Our Queen would be furious should we jeopardize the Compact."

"I'll fix it. But who would seek to fell the beauty?"

"It's your game, fool. Run it more tightly. Already the Queen asks about you."

"She misses me?" Adam preened a moment.

Finnbheara snorted. "You may have pleased her in passing, but I am her King."

* * * * *

Adrienne was burning. Tethered to a stake, like an ancient witch trapped amidst a mountain of blazing timbers while the villagers gazed placidly on. *Help me!* she pleaded through parched lips as she convulsed in the billowing smoke.

Choking, choking, and then she felt the hideous sensation of a thousand fire ants scurrying frantically to and fro just beneath the top layer of her skin.

She was unaware of the Hawk sponging her brow, bathing her body with cool cloths, and wrapping her in soft woolens. He pushed damp tendrils of hair from her brow and kissed it gently. Stoking the fire, he turned back quickly to discover her thrashing violently against the snug cocoon of blankets the healer had assured him might ease her fever.

Desperation engulfed him, more brutal and pounding than the fiercest Highland squall.

A primitive groan escaped his lips as the Hawk watched her scratch viciously at her flawless skin in a vain attempt to assuage the attack of whatever fierce beastie the fever had conjured to torment her with. She'd scratch herself raw if he didn't stop her, yet he couldn't bear to bind her hands as the healer had recommended. A vision of her straining against the bonds flickered through his mind's eyes, and he swallowed a bitter howl of impotent fury. How could he wage war against an unseen invader that had no known vulnerability? How could he defeat a poison that had no cure?

He paused only a heartbeat before ripping the shirt from his body and kicking off his boots. Clad only in his kilt, he eased onto the bed and wrapped himself around her, drawing her back against him tightly.

"Adrienne!" He cursed harshly as he cradled her in his arms. How could he feel such grief for a virtual stranger? From whence rose this feeling that they were to have had more time?

He leaned back against the wall, cradling her between his legs, his arms wrapped tightly around her while she thrashed and shuddered, his chin resting upon her head.

Deep in the night the fever peaked, and she talked, and cried silvery tears.

She would never know that he kissed them away, one by one.

She would never know that he listened with a heavy heart as she cried for a man he deemed not worth crying for, and that he wished with all his might that he had been the first man she'd loved.

Ever-hard Darrow Garrett. The bastard who'd broken his wife's heart.

What kind of self-respecting Scotsman was named Ever-hard?

In the wee hours of dawn, the Hawk fingered the smooth ebony of the chess piece Grimm had given him, even as Adrienne called for it in her delirium. He studied it and wondered why this game piece was so important to her that as she lay dying, she searched desperately for it in the inky corridors of her mind.

* * * * *

It was the commotion that woke him, dragging him from a deep and dreamless sleep. Refusing to open his eyes, he felt his surroundings with his senses first. Damn it, she still burned! Hotter, if possible. His wife of scant days dying in his arms. What had woken him? Was it the Rom, finally arrived?

"Let me pass!" The smithy's voice thundered from beyond the closed door, loud enough to rattle it. Hawk came fully awake. *That* man's voice made his body ready for battle.

"The Hawk will kill you, man," Grimm scoffed. "He doesn't like you to begin with, and he's not in a good temper."

Hawk nodded agreement with Grimm's words, and was glad he'd posted a half-guard outside the Green Lady's room. There was no telling what he might have done if he'd woken to find the arrogant blacksmith peering down at him in his present frame of mind.

"Fools! I said I can cure her," the smithy snapped.

Hawk stiffened instantly.

"A fool, I am?" Grimm's voice cracked with disbelief. "Nay, a fool is he who thinks there's a cure for such a poison as Callabron!"

"Dare you risk it, Grimm?" the smithy asked coolly.

"Let him pass," the Hawk ordered through the closed door.

He heard the sound of swords drawing away with a metallic slash as guards parted the crossed blades that had been barring entrance to the Green Lady's room, and then Adam was standing in the doorway, his big frame nearly filling

it.

"If you came here thinking to play with me, Adam Black, get thee gone before I spill your blood and watch it run on my floor. 'Twould be a wee distraction, but it would make me feel better."

"Why do you hold her thusly? So close, as if so dear?"

Hawk tightened his arms around her. "She's dying."

"But you scarce know her, man."

"I have no reason for it that makes any sense. But I refuse to lose her."

"She's beautiful," Adam offered.

"I've known many beautiful lasses."

"She's more beautiful than the others?"

"She's more *something* than the others." Hawk brushed his cheek gently against her hair. "Why have you come here?"

"I heard it was Callabron. I can cure her."

"Think not to tempt me with impossibilities, smithy. Lure me not to false hope or you will lie dying beside her."

"Think not to tempt *me* with impossibilities, Lord Hawk," Adam echoed brightly. "Furthermore I speak truth about a cure."

Hawk studied the smithy a careful moment. "Why would you do this, if you can?"

"Totally self-serving, I assure you." Adam crossed to the bed and sat upon the edge. He extended his hand, then stopped in mid-reach at the look on Hawk's face. "I can't heal her without touching her, dread Hawk."

"You mock me."

"I mock everything. Don't take it so personally. Although in your particular case, it is meant rather personally. But in this, I do offer you truth. I have the cure."

Hawk snorted and tightened his arms protectively about his wife. "How does it come to pass that a simple smithy has such knowledge of an invaluable cure?"

"You waste time asking me questions while the lady lies dying."

"Give it to me then, smithy."

"Oh no. Not so easily—"

"Now who's wasting time? I want the cure. Give it to me and begone, *if* you really have it."

"A boon for a boon," Adam said flatly.

Hawk had known this was coming. The man wanted his wife. "You son of a bitch. What do you want?"

Adam grinned puckishly. "Your wife. I save her. I get her."

Hawk closed his eyes. He should have fired the bastard smithy when he'd had the chance. Where the hell were the Rom, anyway? They should have been at Dalkeith by now.

The smithy could heal his wife, or so he said.

The Rom may know nothing.

And all the smithy wanted in exchange for saving his wife's life was his wife.

Every fiber in his body screamed in defiance. Entrust this woman, bequeath her body and her lush bounty unto another man? Never. Hawk forced his eyes open and stared at the man called Adam. He was to allow this arrogant, beautiful bastard of a smithy to raise his body above his wife's and capture her moans of pleasure in his lips? The smithy's lips were even now curving in a cruel smile as he savored the war that waged within the Hawk.

Hawk schooled his face to impassive calm. Never betray the real feelings. Never let them see what you're thinking when it hurts the deepest. How well he'd learned that lesson from King James.

Yet—still—*anything* so that she might live. "A lass is not a boon to be granted. I

will give her to you if—and only if—she wants you," he said finally. If she died he would lose her. If she lived, by price of saving her, he would lose her too. But then again, maybe not. Unable to defuse the rage which he knew must be blazing in his eyes, he closed them again.

"Done. *You will give her to me if she wants me.* Remember your words, Lord Hawk."

Hawk flinched.

When he opened his eyes again, Adam was holding out a hand to his wife's face. Sweat glistened in beads above her lips and on her forehead. The wound upon her neck was pussing green around its blackened mouth. "You touch her, smithy, no more than you must to cure her," the Hawk warned.

"For now. When she's cured, I touch her all she wants."

"*She* is the key word there."

Adam laid his palm against Adrienne's cheek, intently studying the wound on her neck. "I need boiling water, compresses, and a dozen boiled linens."

"Bring me boiling water, compresses, and a dozen boiled linens," the Hawk roared at the closed door.

"And I need you out of this room."

"No." There was no more finality in death than in the Hawk's refusal.

"You leave or she dies," Adam murmured, as if he'd merely said "It's raining, had you noticed?"

Hawk didn't move a muscle.

"Sidheach James Lyon Douglas, have you a choice?" Adam wondered.

"You have all my names. How do you know so much about me?"

"I made it my business to know so much about you."

"How do I know you didn't shoot her yourself with some obscure poison that isn't even Callabron but mimics it, and now you're faking a cure—all so you can

simply steal my wife?"

"Absolutely." Adam shrugged.

"What?" Hawk snarled.

Adam's eyes glittered like hard stones. "You *don't* know. You must make a choice. Can you save her at this point, Lord Hawk? I don't think so. What are your options? She's dying from something, that much is plain to see. You think it's Callabron, but you're not certain. Whatever it is, it is killing her. I say I can cure her and ask a boon for it. What choice do you have, really? They say you make hard decisions look easy. They say you're a man who would move a mountain without blinking, if he wanted that mountain moved. They say you have an unerring sense of justice, right and wrong, honor and compassion. They say, also"—Adam grimaced at this—"that you are passingly fair between the sheets, or so one woman said, and it offended me in great sum. In fact, they say entirely too much about you for my liking. I came here to hate you, Hawk. But I didn't come here to hate this woman you claim as your wife."

Adam and Hawk stared at each other with barely harnessed violence.

Adrienne cried out sharply and shuddered in Hawk's arms. Her body convulsed, then tensed as if pulled taut on a rack. Hawk swallowed hard. *What choice?* There was no choice, no choice at all.

"Cure her," he muttered through gritted teeth.

"You grant my boon?" the smithy asked.

"As we agreed. Only if she chooses you."

"You will place no restrictions upon any time she chooses to spend with me. I am wooing her from this day forth and you will not caution her from me. She is free to see me as she pleases."

"I am wooing her too."

"That is the game, Hawk," Adam said softly, and Hawk finally understood. The smithy didn't want his wife handed over freely. He wanted a contest, a battle for her favors. He wanted an open challenge, and intended to win.

"You will hate it when I take her from you, dread Hawk," the smithy promised.
"Close the door when you leave."

CHAPTER 10

"HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT A MAN'S WORLDS CAN BE TURNED inside out before he even has a chance to see it coming and try to stop it, Grimm?"

Hawk had started drinking the moment the door had shut on his wife and the smithy. He was trying with determination to get head-reeling, feet-stumbling, bellyaching drunk and was not succeeding.

"Do you believe he can cure her, Hawk?"

Hawk puzzled a moment. "Aye, Grimm. I do. There's something unnatural about Adam Black, and I mean to find out what it is."

"What do you suspect?"

"I don't know. Grimm, I want you to find out everything about the man you can. Talk to everyone on the estate until you get some answers. Where he came from, when he came here, who he's related to, what he does all day. I want to know about every breath he draws, every piss he takes."

"Understood, Hawk."

"Good."

They both turned to stare at the door to the Green Lady's room. It had been hours since the smithy had closed the door. Not a sound had escaped since.

"Who would try to kill her, Hawk?" Grimm puzzled. "Mad Janet was practically a recluse. According to the gossip at Comyn keep, fewer than five people ever saw her. How could a lass so far out of circulation offend anyone enough to invite murder?"

Hawk rubbed his head tiredly. His stomach was churning and the Scotch wasn't helping. On sudden impulse he rolled the bottle away from him, toward Grimm. "Don't let me have any more. I need a clear head. I can't think right now. He's touching her, Grimm. He could be bathing her, gazing upon her. I want to kill him."

"So do it, when he's done curing her," Grimm said easily.

"I can't!"

"Then I'll do it for you," Grimm said, ever faithful.

"Nay. We made a pact."

"You made a pact with him?" Grimm's eyes flared wide. "Damn it all to hell, man! You never break a pact. Why would you be so foolish to make a pact with a man you can't stand?"

"He can save my wife."

"When did you come to have such feeling for this Mad Janet you swore never to take to wife anyway?"

"Shut up, Grimm."

"What's the pact, Hawk?" Grimm persisted.

"He wants Adrienne."

"You gave him Adrienne?"

"Grimm, no more questions. Just find out anything and everything about this man called Adam Black."

"Be assured, I will."

* * * * *

"You are flawless, beauty," the smithy said as his coal-black eyes raked over her nude body twisted in the damp sheets.

"Flawless lalless," Adrienne pooh-poohed dreamily. The heat was ebbing, slowly.

"Decidedly lawless."

He couldn't know. Not possibly. "What do you mean by that?" She struggled to form the words, and wasn't certain she even made a sound.

"Just that there must be something *criminal* about a woman so beautiful," he replied archly.

"Nothing criminal about me," she demurred distantly.

"Oh, beauty, I think there is much criminal about you."

"There is something just not normal about you, Adam," she mumbled as she tossed restlessly.

"No," he replied smugly, "there is certainly nothing normal about me. Give me your hand, beauty, I'll show you not normal."

And then there was cool water, frothy ocean upon powder-white sand. Whisper of gentle surf rushing over the beach, cool sand beneath her bare toes. No ants, no rack, no fire. Just peace in her most favorite haven in the world. The seaside at Maui where she'd vacationed with her girlfriends. Beautiful, blissful days they'd passed there with fresh-squeezed orange juice and endless summer jogs on the beach, bare feet slapping the edge of the tide.

And then the stranger images. Scent of jasmine and sandalwood. Snowflake sand dotted with fuchsia silk tents and butterflies upon every bough of every limb of every rowan. An improbable place. And she was lying in the cool sands and healed by tropical lapis waves.

"Beauty, my beauty. Want me. Feel me, hunger for me and I will slake your need."

"Hawk?"

Adam's anger was palpable in the air.

Adrienne forced her eyes open a slit, and gasped. If her body had obeyed, she would have shot straight up in bed. But it didn't obey. It lay flaccid and weak upon the bed while her temper shot up instead. "Get out of my room!" she yelled. At least her voice hadn't lost its vigor.

"I was just checking to make sure your forehead cooled." Adam grinned puckishly.

"You thickheaded oaf! I don't care why you're in here, just get out!"

Finally her body obeyed a little and she managed to get her fingers around a tumbler at the bedside. Too weak to throw it, she was at least able to slide it off the table. Glass crashed to the floor and shattered. The sound mollified her slightly.

"You were dying. I cured you," Adam reminded.

"Thank you. Now get out."

Adam blinked. "That's all? Thank you, now get out?"

"Don't think I'm so stupid that I don't realize you were touching my breasts!" she whispered fiercely. At the abashed look on his face she realized he had indeed thought she'd been unconscious. "So that and my thanks are all you'll be getting, smithy!" she growled. "I hate beautiful men. *Hate* them!"

"I know," Adam smiled with real pleasure and obeyed her dismissal.

Adrienne squeezed her eyes shut tightly but upon the pink-gray insides of her eyelids shadows arose. Images of being held between the Hawk's rock-hard thighs, wrapped in arms that were bands of steel. His voice murmuring her name over and over, calling her back, commanding her back. Demanding that she live. Whispering words of... what? What had he said?

* * * * *

"She lives, Lord Buzzard—"

"Hawk."

"Both birds of prey. What difference?"

"A buzzard is a scavenger. A hawk selects his kill as carefully as a falcon. Stalks it with the same unerring conviction. And fails as frequently—which is never."

"Never," Adam mused. "There are no absolutes, Lord Hawk."

"In that you're wrong. I choose, I adhere, I pursue, I commit, I attain. That—that, my errant friend—is an absolute."

Adam shook his head and studied the Hawk with apparent fascination. "A worthy adversary. The hunt begins. No cheating. No tricks. You may not forbid

her from me. And I know that you tried to already. You will recant your rules."

Hawk inclined his dark head. "She chooses," he allowed tightly. "I will forbid her nothing."

Adam nodded, a satisfied nod as he plunged his hands deep in the pockets of his loose trousers and waited.

"Well? Get thee from my castle, smithy. You have your place, and it is without my walls."

"You might try a thank-you. She lives."

"I'm not certain you aren't the reason she almost died."

At that, Adam's brow creased thoughtfully. "No. But now that I think on it, I have work to do. I wonder... who would try to kill the beauty, if not me? And I didn't. Had I, she would be dead. No slow poison from my hand. Quick death or not at all."

"You're a strange man, smithy."

"But I will soon be most familiar to her."

"Pray the gods she is wiser than that," Grimm mumbled as Adam stalked off into the dim corridor. Night had fallen and the castle lamps were still largely unlit.

Hawk sighed heavily.

"What deal did you make with that devil?" Grimm asked in a voice scarcely audible.

"Think you he may be?"

"Something is not natural about that man and I intend to find out what."

"Good. Because he wants my wife, and she doesn't want me. And I saw her wanting him with a hurt in her eyes."

Grimm winced. "You are certain you don't want her just because she doesn't want you and he wants her?"

Hawk shook his head slowly. "Grimm, I have no words for what she makes me feel."

"You always have words."

"Not this time, which warns me truly that I'm in deep trouble and about to get deeper. Deep as I must to woo that lass. Think you I've been spelled?"

"If love can be bottled, or shot from Cupid's bow, my friend," Grimm whispered into the breeze that ruffled in Hawk's wake when he entered Adrienne's chamber.

* * * * *

In the weeks to come the Hawk would wonder many times why the Rom, whom he trusted and valued, and whom he had thought returned those feelings in kind, had never come to tend his wife during those terrible days. When he spoke to his guard, the man said that he'd delivered the message. Not only didn't the Rom come, they were conspicuously absent from Dalkeith. They made no trips to the castle to barter their goods. They spent no evenings weaving tales in the Greathall before a rapt and dazzled audience. Not one of the Rom approached Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea; they kept to their fields, out past the rowans.

That fact nagged at Hawk's mind briefly, but was quickly lost in the thick of more weighty concerns. He promised himself he would resolve his questions with a trip to the gypsy camp once his wife was fully healed and matters with the strange smithy were resolved. But it was to be some time before he made the trip to the Rom camp; and by that time, things would be vastly changed.

* * * * *

Adrienne drifted up from healing slumber to find her husband watching her intently.

"I thought I'd lost you." The Hawk's face was dark, glistening in the firelight, and it was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes. It took her several long moments to shake loose the cotton stuffing that had replaced her brain. With wakefulness came defiance. Just looking at that man made her temper rise.

"Can't lose something you don't have. Never had me to begin with, Lord Hawk," she mumbled.

"Yet," he corrected. "I haven't had you yet. At least not in the sense that I will

have you. Beneath me. Bare, silky skin slippery with my loving. My kisses. My hunger." He traced the pad of his thumb along the curve of her lower lip and smiled.

"Never."

"Never say never. It only makes you feel more foolish when you end up taking it back. I wouldn't want you to feel too foolish, lass."

"Never," she said more firmly. "And I never say never unless I'm absolutely one hundred percent certain I will never change my mind."

"There are a lot of nevers in there, my heart. Be careful."

"Your heart is a wrinkled prune. And I mean every blasted one of those nevers."

"Mean them as you will, lass. 'Twill only make it that much more pleasurable to break you to my bit."

"I am not a mare to be broken to ride!"

"Ah, but there are many similarities, wouldn't you say? You need a strong hand, Adrienne. A confident rider, one not dismayed by your strong will. You need a man who can handle your bucking and enjoy your run. I won't break you to ride. Nay. I will break you to the feel of my hand and mine alone. A mare broken to ride allows many riders, but a wild horse broken to the bit of one hand—she loses none of her fire, yet permits none but her true master to mount her."

"No man has ever been my master, and none ever will. Get that straight in your head, Douglas." Adrienne gritted her teeth as she struggled to pull herself upright. It was hard trying to hold her ground in a conversation while lying flat on her back feeling ridiculously weak, looking up at this goliath of a man. "And as to mounting me..."

To her chagrin and the Hawk's vast amusement, she slipped back into healing slumber without completing the thought.

Unknown to him, she more than completed it in her dreams. *Never!* her dreaming-within-the-dream mind seethed, even as she was drawn to the great black charger with fire in his eyes.



CHAPTER 11

"IT'S NOT *ME* SOMEONE'S TRYING TO KILL," ADREANNE REPEATED.

She was buried in mounds of plush pillows and woolen throws and felt helplessly swallowed by a mountain of feathers. Every time she moved the dratted bed moved with her. It was wearing her out, like being cocooned in a down straitjacket. "I want to get up, Hawk. *Now*." Too bad her voice didn't come off sounding as firm as she'd intended. It would have—it should have—except being in a bed while trying to argue with this particular man scattered her thoughts like leaves to a windstorm, into a jumble of passionate images; bronzed skin against pale, ebony eyes and hot kisses.

The Hawk smiled, and she had to bite down the overwhelming urge just to smile blankly back, like some dim-witted idiot. He was beautiful when somber, but when he smiled she was in grave danger of forgetting that he was the enemy. And she must never forget that. So she put a lot of frustration to good use, and dredged up an impressive scowl.

His smile faded. "Lass, it's been you both times. When are you going to face the facts? You must be guarded. You'll get used to it. In time you'll scarce notice them." He gestured at the dozen brawny men standing outside the Green Lady's room.

She shot a withering glance at her "elite guard" as he called them. They stood legs wide, arms folded across thin broad chests. Implacable, stony faces, and all of them with physiques that would make Atlas consider shrugging half his weight over. *Where do they breed these kind of men? The Bonny and Braw Beefcake Farm?* She snorted her disgust. "What you don't understand is that if you're so busy protecting *me*, the assassin is going to get whoever they're really after. Because it's *not* me!"

"Do they call you 'Mad Janet' because you refuse to accept reality?" he wondered. "*Reality is* that someone wishes you dead. *Reality is* that I am only trying to protect you. *Reality is* that you are my wife and I will always keep you safe from harm." He was leaning closer as he spoke, punctuating the phrase *reality is* with a sharp stab at the air directly in front of her. Adrienne compensated by shrinking deeper into her haven of feathers each time he

stabbed.

"It is my duty, my honor, and my pleasure," he continued. His eyes swept her upturned face and darkened with desire. "Reality... ah... *reality is* that you are exquisitely beautiful, my heart," he said in a voice suddenly roughened.

His voice conjured images of sweet cream blended with fine Scotch, tossed over melting ice cubes. Smooth and rough at the same time. It unnerved her, flatly shattering what little composure she'd been hugging tightly around her. When he wet his full lower lip with his tongue her mouth went dry as a desert. And his dark eyes flecked with gold were a smoldering promise of endless passion. His eyes that were locked on her lips and oh, but he was going to kiss her and she would do anything to prevent that!

"It's time you know the truth. I am *not* Mad Janet," she snapped, saying something, anything, whatever came to mind to keep his lips from claiming hers in that intoxicating pleasure. "And for the umpteenth time—I am not your blasted heart!"

He agreed instantly. "I didn't think you were. Mad, I mean. But you *are* my heart, whether you like it or not. By the bye, neither does Lydia. Think you're mad, that is. We both know you're intelligent and capable. Except when it comes to two things: your safety and me. You're completely unreasonable about both of those issues." He shrugged one of his muscled shoulders. "That's why I'm having this wee talk with you. To help you see things more clearly."

"Oooh! Those are the two things *you're* being so pigheaded about. I'm not in danger and I don't want you!"

He laughed. Damn the man, but he laughed. "You *are* in danger, and as to wanting me..." He moved closer. His weight settling on the down ticks beside her caused her to shift and roll alarmingly. Right into his arms. *How convenient*, she thought sardonically. Now she understood why they'd used all those down ticks in the olden days. And why they'd had so many children.

"You're right, I do want you—"

He froze. "You do?"

"—out of my room," she continued. "Out of my face and out of my life. Don't

get in my space, *don't even breathe my air, okay?*"

"It's *my* air, by the bye, as laird, and all that. But I could be persuaded to share it with you, sweet wife."

He was smiling!

"And I am *not* your wife! Or at least, not the one you were supposed to get! I'm from the nineteen nineties—that's almost five hundred years in the future in case you can't add—and the Comyn killed his own daughter. How? I don't know, but I have my suspicions, and I haven't got the faintest idea how I ended up in his lap. But he had to marry someone to you—he said I was a godsend—so he used me when I popped in! And that's the long and the short of how I ended up getting stuck with you."

There. It was out. The truth. That should stop him from any further plans of seduction. No matter that if what Lydia had told her was true about King James, she'd just jeopardized the entire Douglas clan. Her words prevented his lips from reaching hers and that was the most imminent danger she could see. Not even the wrath of vengeful kings seemed quite as threatening. One more beautiful man, one more broken heart.

The Hawk sat motionless. He studied her a long moment in silence, as if digesting what she'd just said. Then a gentle smile chased the clouds from his eyes. "Grimm told me you wove outlandish tales. He said you had an epic imagination. Your father told Grimm how you begged to be allowed to be his bard, rather than his daughter. Lass, I have nothing against a good tale and will willingly listen, if you but take my counsel about your safety."

Adrienne blew out a frustrated breath that sent a strand of her silvery-blond hair brushing the Hawk's face. He kissed it as it slid gently across his mouth.

Flames uncoiled in her belly. She shut her eyes and gathered her composure from the fleeting corners of her soul. *I*

will not think about him kissing any part of me, she told herself firmly.

"I am *not* Red Comyn's daughter," she sighed, squeezing her eyes more tightly shut. When was she going to figure out that closing her eyes didn't make anything go away? She opened her eyes. Oh dear heaven, but the man was

magnificent. She pondered the thought with some pride that she could dislike him so intensely, yet still be so objective about his good looks. A sure sign of her maturity.

"Nay, it doesn't matter. You are my wife now. That's all that matters."

"Hawk—"

"Hush, lass."

Adrienne stilled, absorbed in the warmth of his hands on hers. When had he taken her hands in his? And why hadn't she pulled away instinctively? And why was the slow, sensual movement of his skin against hers so intoxicating?

"Adrienne... this Callabron. For it to work correctly it must enter the body through a primary vessel of blood." His fingers lightly skimmed the faint red mark that still puckered the translucent skin of her throat. "This was no near miss. This was perfect aim."

"Who would want to kill me?" She swallowed tightly. How could anyone want to? No one here knew her. But... what if someone wanted to kill Mad Janet, and didn't know she *wasn't* her?

"For that I have no answer, my heart. Yet. But until I do you will be guarded day and night. Every moment, every breath. I will not risk your life foolishly again."

"But I am not Janet Comyn," she tried again, stubbornly.

His ebony gaze searched her clear gray eyes intently. "Lass, I really don't care who you are, or have been, or need to think you'll be. I want you. In my life. In my arms. In my bed. If it makes you feel better to believe this... this thing about being from the future, then believe it if you must. But from this day on, you are first and foremost my wife, and I will keep you safe from anything that would hurt you. You need never fear again."

Adrienne raised her hands helplessly. "Fine. Guard me. So can I get up now?"

"No."

"When?" she asked plaintively.

"When I say so." He smiled disarmingly and ducked to steal a kiss. His face came smack up against both her hands. It took every ounce of her willpower not to cradle it with her palms and lead him to the kiss he sought with shaking hands.

He growled and gave her a long measuring look. "I should treat you like one of my falcons, wife."

"Let me get out of bed," she bartered prettily. *No way was she going to ask how he treated his falcons.*

He growled, lower in his throat, and left then. But the elite dozen stayed at her door.

After he was gone she remembered one thing he'd said most clearly. *You need never fear again.* The man was just too good to be true.

* * * * *

The days of healing were pure bliss. Lydia overrode the Hawk's objections and had a chaise carried out to the gardens for Adrienne. Although she was still heavily guarded, she was able to curl up in the golden sunshine like a sleepy, smug cat, which went a long way toward healing her. The rose-drenched days of conversation with Lydia, as they came to know one another through small talk and small silences, healed more than her exhausted body. Sipping tea

(she would have preferred coffee, but that would have brought the Hawk and his boons into the picture) and sharing stories, occasionally Adrienne would shiver with the intense feeling that this was where she'd belonged all her life.

Love can grow among the rocks and thorns of life, she thought in one of those small silences that was comfortable as a favored, love-worn blanket. From the desolate barrens of her own life, somehow, she had come to be here, and here life was blessed—peaceful and perfect and simple.

Adrienne healed more quickly than anyone imagined possible. Tavis pointed out that she had the resilience of youth on her side, as he flexed and studied his time-gnarled hands. Not to mention an indomitable nature, he'd added. *You mean stubborn*, the Hawk had corrected him.

Lydia believed there might have been just a blush of love on her cheeks. *Ha!*

Hawk had scoffed. *Love of the sunshine, perhaps.* And Lydia had almost laughed aloud at the seething look of jealousy Hawk had turned on the bright rays as he'd gazed out the kitchen windows.

Grimm offered the likelihood that she was so angry with the Hawk that she hurried her healing just to fight with him on equal footing. *Now there's a man who understands women,* Hawk had thought.

None of them knew that with the exception of missing her cat, Moonshadow, those days were the happiest she'd ever known.

While she lazed in the peace and sunshine, Adrienne enjoyed a blissful kind of ignorance. She would have been mortified had someone told her that she'd talked about Eberhard in her drugged stupor. She would not have understood if someone had told her she'd spoken of a black queen, for her waking mind hadn't remembered the chess piece yet.

She had no idea that while she and Lydia were passing sweet time, Grimm had been sent to, and was now on his way back from, Comyn keep, where he'd discovered shocking information about Mad Janet.

And she would have packed up a few things and run for her very life, if not her soul, had she known how obsessively determined the Hawk was to claim her as his wife, in *all* the aspects it entailed.

But she knew none of this. And so her time spent in the gardens of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea would be lovingly placed as a precious jewel into the treasure chest of her memory, where it would twinkle like a diamond amid the shadows.

CHAPTER 12

IT WASN'T MUCH FUN SNOOPING AROUND THE CASTLE WITH a dozen hard-boiled commandos trailing along behind her, but Adrienne managed. After a while she pretended they weren't there. Just as she pretended the Hawk was nothing more than an annoying gnat to be brushed away repeatedly.

Dalkeith Upon-the-Sea was as lovely a castle as she'd ever imagined when as a child she'd snuggled under a tent of blankets in bed with a pilfered flashlight, reading fairy tales long after lights out.

The rooms were spacious and airy, with brightly woven tapestries hung on the thick stone walls to smother any chill drafts that might seep through the cracks, although Adrienne hadn't been able to find so much as one crack in a wall—she'd peeped behind a few tapestries, just to see.

Historical curiosity, she'd told herself. Not that she was hunting for imperfections in either the castle or the castle's laird.

Hundreds of beautiful mullioned windows. Obviously the people who inhabited Dalkeith couldn't bear to be cooped up inside when there was so much lush landscape to be enjoyed outdoors in Scotland's mountains, vales, and seashores.

Adrienne sighed wistfully as she paused by a vaulted window to savor the view of the unceasing slate-silver waves crashing against the cliffs at the west end.

A woman could fall in love in a place like this. Tumble silken tresses over dainty satin slippers to land in a mass of ribbons and romance right at the perfect laird's perfect feet.

At that very moment, as if summoned by her wayward thoughts, the Hawk walked into her line of vision in the bailey below, leading one of the largest black chargers she'd ever seen. Adrienne started to turn away, but her feet would no more walk her away from the window than her eyes would avert themselves, and in spite of her best intentions to ignore him, she stood watching in helpless fascination.

With a fluid leap, the kit-clad Scottish laird tossed himself onto the back of the

snorting fiesty stallion.

And as he mounted, that lovely kilt went flying up, giving Adrienne a sinful glimpse of powerfully muscled thighs, beautifully dusted with a bit of silky black hair. She blinked a moment, refusing to ponder what else she thought she'd seen.

Surely they wore something under those kilts. Surely it was only her overactive imagination, absurdly overlaying the stallion's obvious masculinity upon the Hawk's body.

Yes. That was it, decidedly. She'd noticed the stallion's prominently displayed attributes in the periphery of her vision while she'd been looking at the Hawk's legs, and managed to muddle the two together, somehow. She certainly had *not* seen that the Hawk was, himself, hung like a stallion.

Her cheeks flushed with that thought. She turned sharply on her heel to squelch it firmly and sought the next unsurveyed room. She had decided to explore the castle that morning, in large part to keep her mind off that dratted man. It just figured that he'd have to walk by the one window she was looking out. *And* toss up his skirts to add fuel to the proverbial fire.

She forced her mind back to the lovely architecture of Dalkeith. She was on the second floor of the castle, and had already traipsed through dozens of guest rooms, including the chamber in which she'd spent her first night. Dalkeith was enormous. There must have been a hundred or more rooms, and many of them appeared as if they'd lain unused for decades. The wing she currently explored was the most recently renovated and frequently utilized. It was finished in light woods, polished to a fine gleam, and not a speck of dust could be seen. Thick woven mats covered the floors, no rushes or cold bare stones here. Bunches of fragrant herbs and dried flowers hung upside down from nearly every window ledge, scenting the corridors.

A shaft of sunlight drew Adrienne's attention to a closed door halfway down the corridor. Etched into the pale wood was an exquisitely detailed prancing horse, rearing elegantly, mane tossing in the wind. A single horn spiraled daintily from its equine brow. A unicorn?

Her hand on the door, she paused, suddenly suffering an odd premonition that

this room might be better left alone. *Curiosity killed the cat...*

When the door swung silently inward, she froze, a hand fluttering on the jamb.

Unbelievable. Simply incomprehensible. Her astonished gaze swept the room from floor to rafter, end to end and back again.

Who had done this?

The room appealed to every ounce of woman in her body. *Face it, Adrienne*, she told herself grimly, *this entire castle appeals to every ounce of woman in your body*. Not to mention the sexy, masculine laird of the keep himself.

This room was made for babies. Crafted with such loving hands that it was almost overwhelming. A cacophony of discordant emotions skittered through her before she shoved them away.

There were cradles of honey oak, curved and sanded smooth so not one splinter could work free and harm baby-soft skin. The east wall displayed high windows, too high for a toddler to risk harm, yet open to the golden glow of the morning sun. Wood floors were smothered with thick rugs to keep baby feet warm.

Brightly painted wooden soldiers dotted the shelves, and lovingly crafted dolls reclined on tiny beds. A miniature castle, replete with turrets, dry moat, and drawbridge was filled with tiny carved people; an honest-to-goodness medieval dollhouse!

Fluffy blankets dotted the cradles and beds. It was a huge room, this nursery. A room in which a child (or a dozen) could grow from baby to young teen before seeking a more adult room elsewhere. It was a room that would fill a child's world with love and security and pleasure for hours on end.

As if someone had created this room thinking like the child he or she used to be, and designed it with all the treasures that had given him or her such pleasure as a wee lad or lass.

But the thing about the room that struck her so hard was that it seemed to be waiting.

Open and warm and inviting, saying, *fill me with laughing babies and love*.

All was in readiness, the nursery was merely biding time—until the right woman would come along and breathe into it the sparkling life of children's songs and dreams and hopes.

A pang of such longing flashed through her that Adrienne wasn't even sure what it was. But it had everything to do with the orphan she'd been, and the cold place she'd grown up in—a place nothing at all like this lovely room; part of a lovely home, in a lovely land, with people who would lavish love upon their children.

Oh, to raise babies in a place like this.

Babies who would know who their mother and father were, unlike Adrienne. Babies who would never have to wonder why they hadn't been worth keeping.

Adrienne rubbed her eyes furiously and turned away. It was too much for her to deal with.

And she turned right into Lydia. "Lydia!" she gasped. But of course. Why should it surprise her to run smack into the wonderful mother of the wonderful man who'd probably built the wonderful nursery?

Lydia steadied her by the elbows. "I came to see if you were feeling all right, Adrienne. I thought it might be too soon for you to be up and about—"

"Who built this room?" Adrienne whispered.

Lydia ducked her head, and for a brief moment Adrienne had the absurd impression that Lydia was trying not to laugh. "The Hawk designed and crafted it himself," Lydia said, intently smoothing tiny crinkles from her gown.

Adrienne rolled her eyes, trying to convince her emotional barometer to stop registering vulnerability and rise to something safe, like anger.

"Why, dear Adrienne, don't you like it?" Lydia asked sweetly.

Adrienne turned back and swept the room with an irritated gaze. The nursery was bright and cheery and alive with the creator's own outpouring of emotion into his creation. She glanced back at Lydia. "When? Before or after the king's service?" It was terribly important that she know if he had built it at seventeen or eighteen, to please his mother perhaps, or recently, in hopes of his own children

someday filling it.

"During. The king gave him a brief leave when he was twenty-nine. There was some trouble with the Highlanders in these parts, and the Hawk was permitted to return to fortify Dalkeith. When the feuding was resolved, he spent a measure of time working up here. He worked like a man possessed, and in truth, I had little idea what he was doing. The Hawk has always worked with wood, building and designing things. He wouldn't let any of us see it, and didn't talk much about it. After he returned to James, I came up to see what he'd been doing." Lydia's eyes misted briefly. "I'll tell you the truth, Adrienne, it made me cry. Because it told me that my son was thinking of children and how precious they were. It filled me with wonder, too, when I saw it completed. I think it would most any woman. Men don't usually see children like this. But the Hawk, he's a rare man. Like his father."

You don't have to sell me on him, Adrienne thought morosely. "I'm sorry, Lydia. I'm very tired. I need to go rest," she said stiffly, and turned for the door.

As she entered the corridor she could have sworn she heard Lydia laughing softly.

* * * * *

Hawk found Grimm waiting for him in the study, gazing out at the west cliffs through the open doors. He didn't miss the tiny whiteness at Grimm's knuckles on the hand that clenched the door frame, or the rigid line of his back.

"So?" Hawk asked impatiently. He would have gone to the Comyn keep to investigate his wife's past himself, but that would have meant leaving Adrienne alone with the damned smithy. No chance of that. Nor could he have taken her with him, so he'd sent Grimm to uncover what had happened to Janet Comyn.

Grimm turned slowly, kicked out a chair, and sat heavily before the fire.

Hawk sat as well, rested his feet upon the desk, and poured them both a brandy. Grimm accepted it gratefully.

"Well? What did she say?" The Hawk's grip tightened on his glass as he waited to hear who had done such terrible things to his wife that her mind had retreated into fantasy. The Hawk understood what was wrong with her. He'd seen battle-

scarred men who had experienced such horrors that they had reacted in similar fashion. Too many barbaric and bloody losses made some soldiers spin a dream to replace the reality, and in time many came to believe the dream was true. As his wife had done. But, unfortunately, with his wife he had no idea what had caused her painful retreat into such an outlandish fancy that she couldn't even bear to be called by her real name. And whatever had happened to her had left her totally unwilling to trust any man, but especially him, it seemed.

The Hawk braced himself to listen, to channel his rage when it came so he could wield it as a cool and efficient weapon. He would slay her dragons, and then begin her healing. Her body was growing stronger day by day, and the Hawk knew Lydia's love had much to do with it. But he wanted *his* love to heal her deepest wounds. And the only way he could do that was to know and understand what she had suffered.

Grimm swallowed, fidgeted in his chair, tilted it at the sides like a lad, then got up and moved to the hearth to shift restlessly from foot to foot.

"Out with it, man!" The week Grimm had been gone had nearly driven the Hawk crazy imagining what this Ever-hard man must have done. Or even worse, perhaps the Laird Comyn himself was to blame for Adrienne's pain. Hawk dreaded that possibility, for then it would be clan war. A terrible thing to be sure, but to avenge his wife—he would do anything. "Who is this Ever-hard?" The question had been gnawing at his insides ever since the night he'd first heard the name emerge from her fevered lips.

Grimm sighed. "Nobody knew. Not one person had ever heard of him."

The Hawk cursed softly. *So, the Comyn was keeping secrets, was he?* "Talk," he commanded.

Grimm sighed. "She thinks she's from the future."

"I know Adrienne thinks that," Hawk said impatiently. "I sent you to discover what Lady Comyn had to say."

"That's who I meant," Grimm said flatly. "The Lady Comyn thinks Adrienne is from the future."

"What?" Hawk's dark brows winged incredulously. "What are you telling me,

Grimm? Are you telling me the Lady Comyn claims Adrienne isn't her blood daughter?"

"Aye."

Hawk's boots hit the floor with a thump as the latent tension charging his veins became a living heat.

"Let me get this straight. Althea Comyn told you that Adrienne is *not* her daughter?"

"Aye."

Hawk froze. This was not what he had expected. In all his imaginings he had never once considered that his wife's fantasy might be shared by her mother.

"Then exactly who does Lady Comyn think the lass is? Who the hell have I married?" Hawk yelled.

"She doesn't know."

"Does she have any ideas?" Sarcasm laced the Hawk's question. "Talk to me, man!"

"There's not much I can tell you, Hawk. And what I know...well, it's damned odd, the lot of it. It sure as hell wasn't what I expected. Ah, I heard such tales, Hawk, to test a man's faith in the natural world. If what they claim is true, hell, I don't know what a man can believe in anymore."

"Lady Comyn shares her daughter's delusions," Hawk marveled.

"Nay, Hawk, not unless Althea Comyn and about a hundred other people do. Because that's how many saw her appear out of nowhere. I spoke with dozens, and they all told pretty much the same tale. The clan was sitting at banquet when all of the sudden a lass—Adrienne—appeared on the laird's lap, literally out of thin air. Some of the maids named her witch, but it was quickly hushed. It seemed the laird considered her a gift from the angels. The Lady Comyn said she saw something fall out of the oddly dressed woman's hand, and fought through the panic to get it. 'Twas the black queen she'd given me at the wedding, which I gave to you when we returned."

"I wondered why she'd sent that to me." Hawk rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"Lady Comyn said she thought it might become important later. She said that she thinks the chess piece is somehow bewitched."

"If so, that would be how she traveled through"—he broke off, unable to complete the thought. He'd seen many wonders in his life, and was not a man to completely discount the possibility of magic—what good Scotsman raised to believe in the wee folk would? But still...

"How she traveled through time," Grimm finished for him.

The two men stared at each other.

Hawk shook his head. "Do you believe...?"

"Do you?"

They looked at each other. They looked at the fire.

"No," they both scoffed at the same time, studying the fire intently.

"She doesn't seem quite usual though, does she?" Grimm finally said. "I mean, she's unnaturally bright. Beautiful. And witty, ah, the stories she told me on the way back here from the Comyn keep. She's strong for a lass. And she does have odd sayings. Sometimes—I don't know if you've noticed—her brogue seems to fade in and out."

Hawk snorted. He had noticed. Her brogue had virtually disappeared when she'd lain ill from the poison, and she'd spoken in an odd accent he'd never heard before.

Grimm continued, almost to himself, "A lass like that could keep a man—" He broke off and looked sharply at the Hawk. Cleared his throat. "Lady Comyn knows who her daughter was, Hawk. *Was* is the key word there. Several of the maids confirmed Lydia's story that the real Janet is dead. The gossip is that she's dead by her father's hand. He had to marry someone to you. Lady Comyn said their clan will never breathe a word of the truth."

"I guess not," Hawk snorted, *if* any of this is true, and I'm not saying it is, the Comyn knows James would destroy us both for it." The Hawk pondered that

bitter thought a long moment, then discarded it as an unnecessary concern. The Comyn would assuredly swear Adrienne was Janet, as would every last man of the Douglas, if word of this ever got to the king in Edinburgh, for the existence of both their clans depended upon it. The Hawk could count on at least that much fealty from the self-serving Comyn.

"What did the laird himself have to say, Grimm?"

"Not a word. He would neither confirm she was his daughter, nor deny it. But I spoke with the Comyn's priest, who told me the same story as Lady Comyn. By the way, he was lighting the fat white praying candles for the soul of the late Janet," he added grimly. "So if there are delusions at the Comyn keep, they are mass and uniformly detailed, my friend."

The Hawk crossed swiftly to his desk. He opened a carved wooden box and extracted the chess piece. He rolled it in his fingers, studying it carefully.

When he raised his eyes again they were blacker than midnight, deeper than a loch and just as unfathomable. "The Lady Comyn believes it brought her here?"

Grimm nodded.

"Then it could take her away?"

Grimm shrugged. "Lady Comyn said Adrienne didn't seem to remember it. Has she ever mentioned it to you?"

Hawk shook his head and looked thoughtfully, first at the black queen, then at his brightly burning fire.

Grimm met Hawk's gaze levelly, and Hawk knew there would never be words of reproach or even a whisper of the deed, if he chose to do it.

"Do you believe?" Grimm asked softly.

* * * * *

The Hawk sat before the fire for a long time after Grimm left, alternating between belief and disbelief. Although he was a creative man, he was also a logical man. Time travel simply didn't fit into his understanding of the natural world.

He could believe in the banshee, who warned of pending death and destruction. He could even believe in the Druids as alchemists and practitioners of strange arts. He'd been raised on childhood warnings of the kelpie, who lived in deep lochs and lured unsuspecting and unruly children to their watery graves.

But traveling through time?

Besides, he told himself as he stuffed the chess piece into his sporran for later consideration, there were other more pressing problems to address. Like the smithy. And his willful wife, upon whose lips the smithy's name sat far too often.

The future would allow plenty of time to unravel all of Adrienne's secrets, and make sense of the mass delusions at the Comyn keep. But first, he had to truly make her his wife. Once that was accomplished, he could begin to worry about other details. Thus resolved, he stuffed away the unsettling news Grimm had brought him, much as he had stuffed away the chess piece.

Plans of just how he would seduce his lovely wife replaced all worries. With a dangerous smile and purpose in his stride, the Hawk went off in search of Adrienne.

CHAPTER 13

ADRIENNE WALKED RESTLESSLY, HER MIND WHIRLING. Her brief nap in the sunshine had done nothing to dispel her wayward thoughts. Thoughts like just how capable, not to mention how willing, the Hawk was of providing babies to fill that dratted nursery.

Instinctively she avoided the north end of the bailey, unwilling to confront the smithy and those unnerving images still fermenting in her mind from when she'd been ill.

South she strayed, beckoned by the glimmer of sun off a glass roof and curiosity deep as a loch. These were no barbaric people, she mused. And if she didn't miss her guess, she was walking right toward a hothouse. How brilliant was the mind that had fashioned Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea. It was impenetrable on the west end due to the cliffs, which presented a sheer, unscalable drop to the fierce ocean. Spreading north, south, and east, the keep itself was sealed behind monstrous walls, all of seventy to eighty feet high. How strange that the same mind which had designed Dalkeith as a stronghold had made it so beautiful. The complicated mind of a man who provided for the necessity of war, yet savored the times of peace.

Careful, getting intrigued are you?

When she reached the hothouse, Adrienne noticed that it was attached to a circular stone tower. During her many hours of surfing the Internet she'd been drawn time and time again to things medieval. The mews? Falcons. It was there they kept and trained falcons for hunting.

Drawn by the lure of animals and missing Moonshadow with an ache in her chest, Adrienne approached the gray stone broch. What had Hawk meant about treating her like one of his falcons? she wondered. Well, she'd just find out for herself, so she'd know what to avoid in the future.

Tall and completely circular, the broch had only one window, which was covered by a slatted shutter. Something about the dark, she remembered reading. Curious, she approached the heavy door and pushed it aside, closing it behind her lest any falcons be tempted to escape. She wouldn't give the Hawk any

excuse to chastise her.

Slowly her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and she was able to make out several empty perches in the dim light. Ah, not the mews, this must be the training broch. Adrienne tried to recall the way the trainers of yore had skilled their birds for the hunt.

The broch smelled of lavender and spice, the heavy musk from the attached hothouse permeating the stone walls. It was a peaceful place. Oh, how easily she could get used to never hearing the rush of traffic again; never having to look over her shoulder again; never seeing New Orleans again—an end to all the running and hiding and fear.

The walls of the broch were cool and clean to the touch, nothing like the stone walls that had once held her prisoner in the gritty dirt of a New Orleans prison cell.

Adrienne shuddered. She'd never forget that night.

The fight had begun over—of all things—a trip to Acapulco. Adrienne hadn't wanted to go. Eberhard had insisted. "Fine, then come with me," she'd said. He was too busy, he couldn't take the time off, he'd replied.

"What good is all your money if you can't take the time to enjoy life?" Adrienne had asked.

Eberhard hadn't said a word, he'd simply fixed her with a disappointed look that made her feel like an awkward adolescent, a gauche and unwanted orphan.

"Well, why do you keep sending me on these vacations by myself?" Adrienne asked, trying to sound mature and cool, but her question ended on a plaintive note.

"How many times must I explain this to you? I'm trying to educate you, Adrienne. If you think for a moment that it will be easy for an orphan who has never been in society to be my wife, think again. My wife must be cultured, sophisticated, European—"

"Don't send me back to Paris," Adrienne had said hastily. "It rained for weeks, last time."

"Don't interrupt me again, Adrienne." His voice had been calm; too calm and carefully measured.

"Can't you come with me—just once?"

"Adrienne!"

Adrienne had stiffened, feeling foolish and wrong, even though she'd known she wasn't being unreasonable. Sometimes she had felt like he didn't want her around, but that didn't make sense—he was marrying her. He was preparing her to be his wife.

Still, she'd had doubts____

After her last trip to Rio, she'd returned to hear from her old friends at the Blind Lemon that Eberhard hadn't been seen in his offices all that much—but he *had* been seen in his flashy Porsche with an equally flashy brunette. A twinge of jealousy had speared her. "Besides, I hear you don't work *too* hard while I'm gone," she had muttered.

The fight had begun in earnest then, escalating until Eberhard did something that so astonished and terrified Adrienne that she fled blindly into the steamy New Orleans night.

He hit her. Hard. And, taking advantage of her stunned passivity—more than once.

Crying, she flung herself into the Mercedes that Eberhard leased for her. She stomped the accelerator and the car surged forward. She drove blindly, on autopilot, mascara-tinted tears staining the cream silk suit Eberhard had chosen for her to wear that evening.

When the police pulled her over, claiming she'd been driving over one hundred miles an hour, she knew they were lying. They were Eberhard's friends. He'd probably called them the moment she'd left his house; he knew which route she always took home.

Adrienne stood outside her car with the policemen, her face bruised and swelling, her lip bleeding, weeping and apologizing in a voice that bordered on hysteria.

It didn't occur to her until much later that neither of the policemen had ever asked her what had happened to her face. They'd interrogated an obviously beaten woman without showing an ounce of concern.

When they'd cuffed her, taken her to the station, and called Eberhard, she wasn't surprised at all when they replaced the receiver, gazed at her sadly, and sent her to be locked up.

Three days she'd spent in that hellish place, just so Eberhard could make his point.

That was the night she'd realized how dangerous he really was.

In the cool of the brooch, Adrienne hugged her arms around herself, trying desperately to exorcise the ghosts of a beautiful man named Eberhard Darrow Garrett and the foolish young woman who'd spent a lonely, sheltered life in an orphanage. Such easy prey she'd been. *Did you see little orphan Adri-Annie? Eberhard's little fool.* Where had she heard those sneering words? On Rupert's yacht, when they thought she'd gone below for more drinks. She shivered violently. *I'll never be a man's fool again.*

"Never," she vowed aloud. Adrienne shook her head to ebb the painful tide of memories.

The door opened, admitting a wide swath of brilliant sunlight. Then it closed again and blackness reigned absolute.

Adrienne froze, huddled in on herself, and forced her heart to slow. She'd been here before. Hiding, waiting, too terrified to draw a breath for fear of alerting the hunter to her exact location. How she'd run and hid! But there had been no sanctuary. Not until the streets of obscurity she'd finally found in Seattle, and there had been an eternity of murky hell down every winding backroad between New Orleans and the haven of the Pacific Northwest.

Bitter memories threatened to engulf her when a husky croon broke the silence.

The Hawk? Singing? A lullaby?

The Gaelic words rumbled husky and deep—why hadn't she suspected he would have a voice like rich butterscotch? He purred when he talked; he could seduce

the Mother Abbess of Sacred Heart when he sang.

"Curious, were you? I see you came of your own accord." His brogue rolled through the broch when he finished the refrain.

"Came where?" she asked defiantly.

"To be trained to my hand." His voice sounded amused, and she heard the rustle of his kilt as he moved in the inky darkness.

She would not dignify it with a response.

A long pause, another rustle, then, "Know you what qualities a falconer must possess, my heart?"

"What?" she grumbled in spite of herself, moving slowly backward. She stretched out her hands like little makeshift antennae in the darkness.

"'Tis an exacting position. Few men can be quality falconers. Few possess the temperament. *A* falconer must be a man of infinite patience, acute hearing, and uncanny vision. Possessed of a daring spirit, and a gentle yet forceful hand. He must be constantly attuned to his ladybird. Know you why?"

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because falcons are very sensitive and excitable creatures, my heart. They are known to suffer from headaches and all manner of human ailments, so sensitive are they. Their extreme sensitivity makes them the finest and most successful huntresses of all time, yet can make them most demanding as well. *And* the haggard... ah, my sweet haggard, she is the purest challenge of all. And by far the most rewarding."

She would not ask what a haggard was.

"'What is a haggard,' you ask, deep in that stubborn, silent soul of yours, my heart?" He laughed richly and it echoed off the stone walls of the suddenly balmy broch.

"Quit 'my hearting' me," she muttered as she moved back oh so cautiously. She had to find a wall. The broch was round, so a wall would guarantee a door at some point. She may as well have been blind in the abysmal blackness.

She heard his footfalls upon the stone floor. Dear heavens, how could he see her? But he was heading straight for her! She backed away slowly, stealthily.

"I am no stranger to the darkness, lass," he warned. "I will find you. I am the finest of falconers."

She said nothing, made no sound.

"A haggard is a wild, mature falcon," he continued, a hint of a smile in his voice. "Usually a falconer is reluctant to assume the challenge of training one, but sometimes, upon a truly rare moon like the harvest moon we had last eve, the falconer espies a bird of such brilliance, such magnificence, that he casts all caution aside and traps the haggard, vowing to bind her to him. Vowing to make her forget all her wild free past—whether in darkness or in light—and give herself freely only to her future with her falconer."

She must *not* answer him; he'd follow her voice.

"My sweet falcon, shall I tell you how I will tame her?"

Silence, absolute. They were circling in the darkness like wary animals.

"First I seel my lady, which is to deprive her of vision, with a black silken hood."

Adrienne smothered an indignant gasp in her shaking hand. The folds of her gown rustled as she sidestepped quickly.

"Then I blunt her talons."

A pebble skittered across the floor a mere yard away. She backstepped, clutching her skirts to keep them still.

"I fasten jesses and dainty bells to her ankles so that I can be aware of her every movement, for I am in the dark too."

She drew a labored breath—almost a pant—then cursed herself for slipping, knowing he would track her traitorous gasp. She knew his strategy was to keep talking until he provoked her into revealing herself. *And then what?* she couldn't help but wonder. Would the Hawk make love to her here and now in the darkness of the broch? A shiver coursed through her, and she wasn't certain it was fear. Not certain at all.

"Then a leash to tether her to her perch until I no longer need leash her. Until she becomes leashed of her own free will. And the best part—the long, slow process of binding her to me. I sing to her, the same sweet song until she grows accustomed to the sound of my voice and mine alone..."

And his butterscotch rich voice began that same husky croon of a lullaby, melting her will.

Adrienne stepped slowly backward; she actually felt the breeze of him passing by her, mere inches away. Where was that wall?

She almost screamed when he found her in the blackness, struggled a long moment against his iron grip. His breath fanned her face and she struggled in his grasp. "Be still, sweet falcon. I will not harm you. Not ever," he whispered huskily.

Adrienne felt the heat of his thighs burning through her thin silk morning gown. She was enveloped in the heady scent of musk and man. *Oh beautiful man, why couldn't I have known you before my last illusion was shattered? Why couldn't I have met you when I still believed?* she mourned. She fought against his arms, which embraced her, cradled her.

"Let me go!"

Hawk ignored her protests, drawing her closer into the steel of his embrace. "Aye, I'll simply have to have you seeled. Or perhaps I should bind your hands and hood your eyes with silk, and lay you across my bed, stripped bare and laid wide open to pure sensation until you become accustomed to my touch. Would that tame you, sweet falcon? Could you grow to love my touch? Crave it as I crave you?"

Adrienne swallowed convulsively.

"A falcon must be wooed with relentless and rough love. By taking away her light, by seeling her, she learns to understand with all her other senses. Senses that don't lie. The falcon is a wise creature, she believes only what she can feel, what she can hold in her talon or her beak. Touch, scent, hearing. By slowly being given back her sight and freedom, she is bound to the hand that restores these things to her. If she fails to trust in her master and doesn't grant him

absolute loyalty by the end of her training—she seeks to flee at every opportunity." He paused, his lips a scant breath from hers. "None of my falcons have ever flown my hand without returning," he warned.

"I am not a stupid bird—"

"Nay, not stupid, but the finest. A falcon is the only other bird that can match a hawk for flight, accuracy, and speed. Not to mention strength of heart."

She'd been lost to him the moment he'd started singing. And she didn't protest further when his lips brushed hers lightly. Nor did she protest in the next instant, when Hawk's hands on her body turned hard, hot and demanding. Coaxing. Claiming.

"Would you soar for me, sweet falcon? I'll take you higher than you've ever been. I'll teach you to bank heights you've only dreamed existed," he promised as he scattered kisses across her jaw, her nose, her eyelids. His hands cradled her jaw in the darkness, feeling every curve, every plane and silken hollow of her face and neck with his hands, memorizing the nuances.

"Feel me, lass. Feel what you do to me!" He pressed his body against hers and rocked his hips, making sure she felt the swollen manhood that rose beneath his kilt and teased the inside of her thigh.

And there was the wall; it had been just behind her back all the time. Cool stone to her back and the inferno of the Hawk searing her through the front of her gown. She raised her hands to pummel him, but he caught and pinned them above her head against the wall. His strong fingers splayed her grip, twined with and teased her hands. Palm to palm, flat against the stone.

"My sweet falcon," he breathed against her neck. "Fight me as you will, it will come to naught. I have set my mind on you, and this is your first time to be seeled. In this blackness you will come to know my hands as they touch every silken inch of your body. I will not take from you any more than that. Just that you suffer my touch, you needn't even see my face. I will be patient while you grow gentled to my hands."

His hands were liquid fire, sliding her gown up and over her thighs and oh! She hadn't had the faintest idea where to look for undergarments this morning. His

hands, his strong, beautiful hands were kneading her thighs, pushing them gently apart to slip the heat of his muscled leg between them. He purred, a rich husky growl of masculine triumph, when he felt the betraying wetness between her thighs. Adrienne flushed furiously; despite her intentions her hands fluttered up to rest upon his shoulders, then slid deep into his soft, thick hair. Her knees, already weak, went limp when he eased the bodice of her gown aside and dropped his head to her breasts, licking and grazing the swollen peaks with his tongue, then his teeth.

She scarcely noticed when he pushed his kilt up; but she definitely noticed when his hard, hot, heavy arousal rose against her thigh. Adrienne made a throaty sound: half whimper, half plea. How had he done this to her? Merely by touching her, the Hawk had somehow managed to unravel every ounce of resistance she'd so painstakingly woven into the cloak of aloofness she wore.

It had never been like this with Eberhard! Her mind fled her body and she clung to the hand that had seeled her. The hand that had denied her sight she tasted with her lips—turned her head to catch his finger with her tongue. Adrienne almost screamed when he took that same finger and placed it inside the slick heat between her legs. "Fly for me, sweet falcon," he urged, cupping one of her heavy breasts with his hand and licking its puckered crest. He teased her mercilessly, nipping her gently, touching her everywhere.

His lips returned to claim hers with desperation sired of a hunger too long denied. A hunger that might never relent. His kiss was long, hard, and punishing, and she reveled in his unspoken demands. A whimper escaped her when the pad of his thumb found the tiny nub of heat nestled between her folds, and Adrienne's head dropped back as a burgeoning wave cast her up and up. Yielding to his fingers, his tongue and lips, she sacrificed the last vestige of her restraint.

"Adrienne," he whispered hoarsely, "you're so beautiful, so sweet. Want me, lass. Need me like I need you."

She felt the heat of a place with no name she'd ever been taught—luring her deeper.

Adrienne struggled to say the words she knew must be said. The one word that she knew would free her. This legendary seducer of women—oh, how easy it was to understand just how legions had fallen before him! He was so good at it.

He almost had her believing that it was for her and only her that he hungered. Almost a fool again.

But that was why they called them rogues. Lotharios. Don Juans. They applied the same skill and relentless determination to seduction that they applied to the art of war—to conquests of any sort.

Resurrecting the tatters of her defenses, she steeled her will against his advances.

The Hawk was lost. Lost as he'd been since the moment he'd laid eyes upon the bewitching lass. No matter her strange fancies risen from some secret and terrible past. He would discover a way to erase all her fears. The things Grimm had told him signified nothing. With love he could overcome any obstacle in time. His lady hawk she would be, for now and always. He treasured her yielding to his hands, savored like the rarest delicacy the sweet honey of her lips, trembled at the thought that she would one day feel for him as he felt for her. With her it would never be like it had been before, empty and hollow.

Nay, with this lass he would mate for life. She had no eye for the beauty the other women had so adored. This lass possessed secrets of her own. Horrors of her own. Depth of her own. All in all, a rare lass indeed. He was sinking, sinking into her depths... the kiss deepened ferociously and he felt her teeth graze his lower lip. It maddened him beyond control.

"Oh!" she breathed, as he nipped her silken neck.

Emboldened by his success, he breathed the first tentative words. He needed to tell her; needed her to understand that this was no game. That he had never in his life felt this way, and never would again. She was the one he'd been waiting for all these years—the one that completed his heart. "Ari, my heart, my love, I—"

"Oh, hush, Adam! No need for words." She pressed her lips to his to silence him.

Hawk froze, rigid as an arctic glacier and every bit as chill.

His lips went still against hers, and Adrienne's heart screamed in agony. But how much worse would it scream if she became a fool again?

His hands dug cruelly into her sides. They would leave bruises that would last for days. Slowly, very slowly, one by one, his fingers unclenched.

She had said *his* name!

"The next time you say Adam's name, lass, is the time I stop asking for what I already own and start taking. You seem to forget that you belong to me. There is no need for me to seduce you when I could simply take you to my bed. The choice is yours, Adrienne. I bid you—choose wisely."

Hawk left the broch without another word, leaving Adrienne alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER 14

ADRIENNE SHOULD HAVE WORKED UP AN APPETITE. She'd spent the rest of the day after the falcon incident wandering every inch of the bailey. *Was this day ever going to end?* she wondered. She must have walked twenty miles, so she should have burned off some of her pent-up frustration. Even her elite guard had looked a little peaked when she'd finally consented to return to the castle proper and brave encountering the Hawk.

Dinner offered fluffy potato soup, thick with melting cheese and spiced with five peppers; a delicate white fish steamed above a fire in oiled olive leaves, garnished with buttery crab; asparagus seared to perfection; plump sausages and crisp breads; puddings and fruits; lemony tarts and blueberry pie. Adrienne couldn't eat a morsel.

Dinner was awful.

If she glanced up one more time and caught the look of death the Hawk had fixed on her, she would have to stuff a fist in her mouth to keep from screaming.

Adrienne sighed deeply as she spooned at the soup everyone else seemed to be relishing. She pushed it, poked at it, smashed the fluffy stuff. She was busily rearranging her asparagus into neat little rows when the Hawk finally spoke.

"If you're going to play with your food, Adrienne, you might give it to someone who's truly hungry."

"Like you, my lord?" Adrienne smiled sweetly at the Hawk's plate, which was also laden with untouched food.

His mouth tightened in a grim line.

"Is the food not to your liking, Adrienne, dear?" Lydia asked.

"It's wonderful. I guess I still don't have my appetite back—" she started.

Lydia sprang to her feet. "Perhaps you should still be resting, Adrienne," she exclaimed, shooting an accusing look at her son. The Hawk rolled his eyes, refusing to get involved.

"Oh, no, Lydia," Adrienne protested quickly. "I am totally recovered." No way she was going back to the Green Lady's room and playing invalid. Too many strange memories there. Tonight she planned to find a new room to sleep in; there certainly wasn't a shortage in this massive castle. She was rather looking forward to exploring the place further and selecting a room of her own. "Really, I'm fine. I just ate too much at lunch."

"You didn't eat lunch," Hawk said flatly.

"Oh, and who are you to know?" she shot back. "Maybe I ate in the kitchen."

"No you didn't," Tavis added helpfully. "I was in the kitchen all day, I'll say. Plumb forgot to eat is what you did, milady. A time or two I've done the same myself, I'll say, and the hungrier I get, the less I feel like eating. So you better be eating, milady. You'll be needing your strength back and I'll say that again!" An emphatic nod of his cheerful head punctuated his decree.

Adrienne stared at her plate, a mutinous flush coloring her cheeks.

Lydia glared at Tavis as she came to stand protectively beside Adrienne's chair.

"I find I'm not all that hungry myself," Lydia said. "What say you and I go for a walk in the gardens—"

"With the brute force trailing behind?" Adrienne muttered, glancing at Hawk beneath lowered lashes.

"—while my son gets some beans from the buttery and brews us a fine cup of coffee for our return," Lydia continued, dangling the bribe as if she hadn't been interrupted.

Adrienne sprang to her feet. Anything to escape his eyes, and coffee to boot.

Betrayal shone in the Hawk's eyes now.

Lydia took Adrienne by the hand and started to lead her to the gardens.

"I'll brew the coffee, Mother," Hawk said to their backs. "But see to it that Maery has Adrienne's things moved to the Peacock Room."

Lydia stopped. The hand holding Adrienne's tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Are you quite certain, Hawk?" she asked stiffly.

"You heard her. She is completely recovered. She is my wife. Where best to guard her?"

"Very well."

"Where's the Peacock Room?" Adrienne spun on her heel to face him.

"On the third floor."

"Will I have it to myself?"

"As much of it as I don't use. 'Tis the laird's chambers."

"I am *not* sleeping with you—"

"I don't recall *asking* you to—"

"You oversized, arrogant, conceited jackass—"

"Really, Adrienne, my son is none of those things," Lydia chastened.

"No reflection on you, Lydia. I really like you," Adrienne said politely. Politeness decamped abruptly as she glared at the Hawk. "But I'm not sharing your bed!"

"Not quite the topic to be bandying about over the dinner table, I'll say," Tavis offered, scratching his head, a flush stealing over his cheeks.

Hawk laughed and the dark rumble vibrated through her body, leaving her nipples erect and her heart hammering.

"Wife, you will share my room this eve if I must have you tied and carried there. Either you can suffer that humiliation or you can come willingly upon your own two feet. I'm not much concerned with how you get there. *Just get there.*"

Mutiny rose up in her breast, threatening to steal her very senses. Dimly she heard the door behind her open and shut and caught the scent of a cloying perfume that turned her stomach. Whatever the scent was, it reminded her of the orphanage; of attics and mothballs and days the nuns had made her scrub the floors and dust the heavy dark furniture.

"Lover!" came the cry of feminine delight from behind her.

Lydia's hand tightened painfully on hers. "Olivia Dumont," she muttered almost beneath her breath. "Dear heavens! I doubt I'll see this day through sane."

"Olivia?" Adrienne echoed, her eyes flying to the Hawk's.

Olivia, the Hawk thought gloomily. This day was rapidly running the gamut from bad to worse. He refused to meet Adrienne's questioning gaze. How dare she call him Adam in the midst of their lovemaking and then ask questions about another woman? She had no right. Not after she'd said *his* name.

Fury consumed him every time he thought about it.

Adam.

Images of his hands ripping apart the smithy flesh from bone comforted him for a moment.

Then desolation overwhelmed him. Now he had two problems: How was he going to make Adrienne want him? And what was he going to do with Olivia?

Fix Olivia up with the smithy?

That brought a grin to his face, the first in a while.

And naturally, Adrienne misunderstood it, thinking his smile was meant for Olivia, as did Olivia. As, it appeared, did his mother from the scowl on her face. Grimm cursed softly beneath his breath. Tavis shook his head, muttered a heated oath, and stalked from the heavily laden dinner table.

"Olivia." Hawk inclined his head. "What brings you to Dalkeith?"

"Why, Hawk," Olivia purred, "need you ask? I've missed you at court. You've been away from my... side... for far too long. I surmised I'd simply have to come collect you myself if I wanted you. So," she finished with a flutter of lashes and a blatant come-hither look, "here I am."

Hawk realized belatedly what a stupid question he'd asked as Adrienne fixed Olivia with a chilling gaze. Hawk knew from experience that Olivia could answer any question—no matter how innocent—with a loaded innuendo, but

he'd shut the unpleasant memory of her antics from his mind the moment he'd returned to Dalkeith. It occurred to him that he would do well to resurrect those memories quickly. It would be unwise to forget Olivia's penchant for troublemaking; the asp was in his nest now.

Olivia's breath caught audibly as she stared at Adrienne.

"Greetings, Olivia. Have you come to speak with my *husband*?"

Momentarily free of Adrienne's wrathful gaze, the Hawk preened. *Husband*, she'd said. And she'd said it possessively. Perhaps there was hope after all.

"We've spoken quite the common language in the past," Olivia drawled. "A sort of wordless communication, if you catch my drift. Just the kind of talk the Hawk likes the best."

"Put *her* in the Peacock Room then," Adrienne spat over her shoulder as she tugged Lydia out the door and slammed it behind her.



CHAPTER 15

"THE KING MAY HAVE RELEASED YOU FROM HIS SERVICE, BUT I would never dream of releasing you from mine. You've serviced me so well in the past, I swear, I'm quite spoiled." Olivia wriggled closer on the low stone bench in the courtyard resting the curve of her ripe hip against the Hawk's muscular thigh.

Lydia had returned alone to the house a scant quarter hour after she and Adrienne had left, shooting a smug smile at her son where he reclined at the great table with the infernal Olivia. Coffee forgotten, the Hawk had quickly steered Olivia to the gardens to see what his wife might be up to. When his mother looked at him like *that*, well, the woman had a mind like a well-oiled catapult, deadly in the attack.

So he had strolled Olivia through the vast gardens at a breathless pace, his eyes peeled for the guards trailing his wife. Nothing. Time and time again his eyes had been drawn northward, to the flickering rim of firelight at the edge of the rowans.

"May I assume we'll entertain each other tonight as we used to, Hawk?" Olivia's warm breath fanned his cheek.

Hawk sighed inaudibly. "Olivia, I'm a married man, now."

Olivia's laugh tinkled just a bit too brightly, reminding Hawk that she was a woman who delighted in stealing another woman's man. The more difficult the man was to obtain, the happier Olivia was. Hawk was well acquainted with her peculiar game; she enjoyed hurting other women, crushing their dreams, breaking their hearts. Hawk suspected it was a revenge of sorts; that once a woman had taken her man, and she'd never gotten over it—had become a bitter, destructive woman instead. Once he'd finally understood, he'd felt almost sorry for her. Almost.

"She's Mad Janet, Hawk," Olivia said dryly.

"Her name is—" He broke off abruptly. He mustn't give Olivia any ammunition. He took a careful breath and rephrased. "Her middle name is Adrienne, 'tis the

one she prefers." He added coolly, "You may call her Lady Douglas."

Olivia's brow rose derisively. "I shan't call her lady anything. The whole country knows she's mad as a rabid hound. I hadn't heard, however, that she was bearable to the eye."

Hawk snorted. "Bearable? My wife is exquisite by any standards."

Olivia laughed shakily, then her voice firmed sarcastically. "Well, and lah-de-dah! Could it be that the legendary Hawk thinks he's in love? The roue of endless women thinks he might stop with this one? Oh, do give it up, *mon cheri*. It's nauseating. I know what kind of man you are. There's no point in affecting elevated sensibilities we both know you don't possess."

Hawk's voice was icy when he spoke. "Contrary to your expectations, I am not the man I was at James's court. You don't know anything about me—other than the illusions you've chosen to believe in." He paused a heavy moment to lend emphasis to his next words. "Olivia, there is no king here to order me to accommodate you, and I'm never going back to James's court. It's over. It's all over." The moment the words were said, Hawk's heart soared. He *was free*.

"That's all it was? You *accommodated* me?" Olivia demanded.

"You knew that." Hawk snorted derisively. "I turned you away a dozen times before you went to James. Did you convince yourself that I'd had a change of heart? You know exactly what happened. It was *you* who petitioned the king to make me—" Hawk broke off abruptly, catching the glint of a silvery-blond mane in the moonlight a few yards from where they sat.

Adrienne approached, her arm tucked in the crook of Adam's elbow, a splendid crimson cape thrown over her shoulders, the silk billowing sensually in the gentle evening breeze.

"Olivia." Adrienne inclined her head.

Olivia snorted lightly and possessively grasped the Hawk's muscled arm.

"Join us," the Hawk said quickly, ignoring the sudden pinch of Olivia's nails.

The thought of Adrienne walking off into the darkness with Adam did dangerous

things to his head. Hawk frowned as he realized that it was likely as dangerous for Adrienne to be exposed to anything Olivia might say or do.

He certainly didn't want the conversation to continue where it had broken off—not in front of Adrienne—without an explanation from him. He knew he had to gain control, but he had no experience with this type of situation. He'd never had an ex-mistress try to provoke trouble with his wife because he'd never had a wife before, and he'd certainly never been entangled in an encounter so rife with hazardous potential. His concern that Olivia might say or do something to hurt Adrienne unbalanced his customary logic.

Fortunately and unfortunately—depending on how he viewed it—Adrienne declined his offer. Relieved, Hawk resolved to pack Olivia *off* at the earliest moment possible then reclaim his wife from the smithy and have a good long talk with her.

"We wouldn't wish to disturb your cozy *tete-a-tete*" Adrienne demurred. "*Bouche-a-bouche* is more like it," she muttered half under her breath.

"What did you just say?" Olivia asked sweetly. "*Tu paries francais?*"

"No," Adrienne replied flatly.

Olivia laughed airily and studied her. "You seem to be a woman of no few secrets, Janet Comyn. Perhaps you and I should have our own *tete-a-tete* and exchange a few of those intimacies. After all"—her gaze wandered possessively over the Hawk—"we share much in common. I'm sure you'd be fascinated to hear of the Hawk's time at James's court. He was quite the man about—"

"That would be lovely," Adrienne interrupted her smoothly, terminating the flow of Olivia's poisonous words. Her insides were already in a turmoil; if she heard much more, she'd either scream or cry—she didn't know which, but she did know it wouldn't be at all ladylike. "Some other time, however, Olivia. I quite have my hands full right now." She wrapped her hands around Adam's bicep, imitating Olivia's clutch on the Hawk. Pressing closer to Adam, she let him steer her away.

"Smithy!" Hawk finally found his voice. He'd listened to the women's conversation in frozen horror, struggling to conceive an entree into the risky

repartee; but once again Adrienne had unwittingly spared him by silencing Olivia before the Hawk had resorted to stuffing his sporran into her scheming, lying mouth.

Adam paused mid-stride and moved closer to Adrienne. Her crimson cape flickered in the soft breeze and Hawk felt as if it was taunting him. Where the hell had she gotten that cape?

"My lord?" Adam smiled sardonically. His large, tanned hand rose to cover Adrienne's where it rested on his arm.

"There are ninety-two horses I'm going to need shoes for. That's three hundred and sixty-eight shoes. Get on it. This minute."

"Certainly, my lord." Adam smiled gamely. "Heating up a forge *is just* what I had in mind."

Hawk's hands clenched into fists at his sides.

"Ninety-two! Hawk!" Olivia fanned her breasts. Her greedy attention had passed to the smithy and she was speculatively looking Adam over. Hawk watched as her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. "I knew you were wealthy, but that's a lot of prime flesh," she drawled, her eyes moving up and down, surveying the smithy from head to toe. She dragged her gaze away from Adam. "Perhaps you might spare a stud for me?" She looked sidewise at the Hawk beneath fluttery lashes.

"Definitely." Hawk sighed as he watched his wife's retreating form. "What do you think of our smithy, Olivia?" he asked cautiously.

* * * * *

What was she doing? Had she lost her mind? When Lydia had proposed that she seek out Adam and stroll the gardens with him, it had seemed like a good idea, although now Adrienne hadn't the faintest idea why.

Because Hawk made her angry, that's why. He'd dared think she was so stupid that he could pursue her and invite his mistress to visit all in the same day.

Once before she'd been just that stupid. Once, she might have convinced herself that Olivia was a troublemaking trespasser and that the Hawk was full of pristine

intentions. Yes, once she would have believed that Eberhard really *was* going to the bathroom, leaving her in the main room of the party, while in fact he was stealing a quickie in the pool-house with a voluptuous socialite.

But she wasn't that woman anymore. She never would be again.

Hawk, the legendary seducer of women, had spent the afternoon trying to convince her that she was the only one he desired, but by dinner a new woman had appeared. An old flame. And he smiled at her. He strolled in the gardens with her. He forgot Adrienne's coffee for her. He was just one of those men who paid attention to whichever woman was in his face and willing.

Olivia was certainly willing.

And just why do you care, Adrienne?

I don't care. I just don't like being treated like a fool!

"The Hawk makes a fool of you," Adam said softly.

Adrienne smothered a gasp. The man seemed to read her very mind. Or it was so true that anyone could see it, even the smithy?

"You deserve far better, Beauty. I would gift you with anything you desired. Silks for your perfect body. All the coffee beans on Jamaica's Blue Mountain. Yet he gifts you with nothing."

"It doesn't matter. Means nothing to me." Adrienne shivered slightly within the cape Adam had draped about her shoulders.

"It should. You're the most exquisite woman I've encountered, winsome Beauty. I would give you everything. Anything. Name it. Command me. I will make it yours."

"Fidelity?" Adrienne shot back at the blacksmith. Somehow they had reached the forge, although Adrienne had no memory of having walked that far. Her feet felt oddly light and her head swam.

"Forever," the smithy purred, "and beyond."

"Truly?" Adrienne asked, then kicked herself. Why ask? Men lie. Words proved

nothing. Eberhard Darrow Garrett had given her all the right words.

"Some men lie. But then some men are incapable of it. Do you lie, sweet Beauty? If I asked you for fidelity and pledged mine in return, would you give it? Could I trust your words?"

Of course, she thought. She had no problem with fidelity.

"I suspected as much," Adam said. "You're one of a kind, Beauty."

Was she answering him? She hadn't thought she was. Adrienne felt light-headed. "Where are the guards?" she murmured.

"You are in my realm. I am all the protection you will ever need."

"Who are you?" Adrienne asked.

Adam laughed at her question. "Come into my world, Beauty. Let me show you marvels to exceed your wildest dreams."

Adrienne turned a dreamy eye toward Dalkeith, but all she saw was a strange shimmer at the forest's edge—no lights of the castle. The sound of surf filled her ears, but that couldn't be. The ocean was at the west end of the bailey and she was at the north. Why couldn't she see the castle? "Where is the castle, Adam? Why can't I see Dalkeith anymore?" Her vision blurred and she was assailed by the uncanny sensation that somehow she was no longer even in Scotland. Wherever she was, it didn't feel like a good place to be.

"The veil grows thin," Adam purred. "Morar awaits you, lovely one."

She was lying beside him in cool sand with no understanding of how she'd managed to get there. Her mind was impossibly muddled. A sense of danger, inimical and ancient, gripped the pit of her stomach. This man... something about this man wasn't quite right.

"Who are you, really, Adam Black?" she insisted. Merely forming the words was a challenge, her tongue felt thick, her muscles rubbery.

Adam grinned. "You're closer than you think, Beauty."

"Who?" she insisted, fighting to retain control of her senses. The rich, dark scent

of jasmine and sandalwood befuddled her mind.

"I am the *sin siriche du*, Beauty. I am the one for you."

"Are you from the twentieth century too?" she asked dizzily. "What's wrong with me? Why do I feel so strange?"

"Hush, Adrienne. Let me love you as you deserve. You are the only one for me..." Too late he realized his error.

The only one. The only one. Hawk had tried to make her believe the same thing. How was the smithy different? Judging from the feel of his hard arousal pressed against her thigh, not very. Just like Eberhard. Just like the Hawk.

Not again! Adrienne fought to steady her voice, to clear her head. "Release me, Adam."

"Never." Adam's powerful hands gripped her body. She could feel them unfasten her cape and slide over her breasts. Guiding her down to the silky sand, he rose above her, his face gilded amber by the fire. Sweat beaded at his brow and glistened just above his cruel and beautiful lips.

Adrienne puzzled at the illogic of sand beneath her body. She could see the red-gold glow of the fire. Where was she? On a beach or at the forge? She concluded foggily that it didn't matter, if he would only let her go. "Release me!" Her cry took all the strength she possessed.

Release her if she asks, fool, a shadow of a voice commanded.

Suddenly the night was still. The sound of surf faded into the chirping of crickets.

Adam's grip tightened painfully on Adrienne's shoulders.

Release her, Adam. She chooses was the bargain struck. Honor the pact—

But King Finnbheara—he dishonors us!

Fool! If you have not honor, you shall not roam freely in the future!

A bitter gust of breeze carried a furious sigh from Adam, and then she was

standing nose to nose with the Hawk. His face was dark with fury.

The silken cape upon Adrienne's shoulders fluttered wildly, a flame of brilliant crimson.

"Where have you been?" Hawk demanded.

"Adam and I—" Adrienne began, then looked around. Adam was nowhere to be seen. Her mind was sharp and clear again; that dreamy fog was an unsavory and incomplete memory. She stood by the fire at the forge, but the flames had deteriorated to cold embers and the night was growing blacker by the minute. "I was just walking," she amended hastily, and ducked her head to avoid his penetrating gaze.

"Adrienne." Hawk groaned, gazing down at the pale cascade of hair that shielded her face from him. "Look at me." He reached for her chin, but she turned away.

"Stop it."

"Look at me," he repeated relentlessly.

"Don't," she pleaded. But he didn't listen. He gripped her waist and pulled her against the hard, male length of him.

Adrienne looked up, despite her best intentions, into eyes of midnight and the chiseled face of a warrior. His bronzed, hard Viking's body promised cataclysmic passion.

"Lass, tell me it's not him. Say it. Give me the words. Even if you can't feel for me yet, tell me you have no real feeling for him and I will overlook all that has transpired." Groaning, he dropped his silky dark head forward against her, as if reveling in simply being close.

The clean, spicy scent of his hair, black as sin, stirred her senses in ways she couldn't comprehend.

"I feel for Adam." Her tongue felt thick. Even her body tried to defy her around this man. She forced herself to say cruel words to hurt him, and it hurt *her* to do it.

"Where did you get this cape?" he asked evenly, his hands sliding over the

rippling fabric.

"Adam." Perhaps he hadn't heard her. He hadn't even so much as flinched.

Deftly, he unfastened the silver brooch at her neck with steady hands. No, she mused, he definitely hadn't heard her. Maybe she'd mumbled inaudibly.

Easily he slid the cape from her body. Gracefully, even.

She stood frozen in shock as his strong, bronzed hands shredded the cape into tatters. The expression on his face was hard and cold. Oh, he'd definitely heard her. How could she remain untouched by the barbaric and beautiful maelstrom of masculine fury that he was in his... jealousy?

Yes, jealousy.

Same as she'd felt about Olivia.

Dear God, what was happening to her?

CHAPTER 16

"WHY DID YOU DO THAT?" SHE GASPED WHEN SHE WAS ABLE TO SPEAK.

Hawk placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head back, forcing her to meet his flinty gaze.

"I will tear from you anything Adam gives you. Remember that. If I find his body draped over yours, he will suffer the same fate." His eyes drifted meaningfully over a scrap of crimson silk stuck on the bark of tree, flapping like a dead thing in the breeze.

"Why?"

"Because I want you."

"You don't even know me!"

His mouth curved in a beautiful smile. "Oh, sweet lass, I know everything about you. I know you're a complex woman, full of dualities; you're innocent, yet tough; intelligent"—He cocked a teasing brow—"but lacking a smidge of common sense."

"I am not!" Adrienne scowled her protest.

He laughed huskily. "You have a wonderful sense of humor and you laugh often, but sometimes you're melancholy." He crowded her with his body and gazed down at her with heavy, hooded eyes. Adrienne tossed her head, trying vainly to dislodge his finger from beneath her chin and escape his penetrating gaze.

He cupped her face firmly with both hands. "You're a willful woman, and I'd like to be the focus of such a willful woman's desire. I'd like to have you yield your trust and loyalty to me as steadfastly as you withhold it. I'm a mature man, Adrienne. I will be patient while I woo you—but woo you, I will."

Adrienne swallowed hard. Damn him for his words!

Not only will I woo you, lass—I will win you completely, the Hawk added in the

privacy of his heart. But he couldn't say that aloud, not yet. Not when she was staring at him, her lower lip trembling ever so slightly, but enough. Enough to give him hope. "I'm going to teach you that one lifetime isn't long enough for all the pleasure I can bring you, lass," he promised.

Adrienne closed her eyes, willing the image of him to hell and beyond. "Where's Olivia?" she asked, eyes closed.

"Fallen over a cliff, if the gods are smiling," Hawk replied dryly.

Adrienne opened her eyes and crinkled her nose, peering at him. Did she see the hint of a smile in his dark gaze? A passionate Hawk was deadly, but she was on guard against passion. A teasing Hawk might slip right through her defenses.

"Or if I'm really lucky and the gods are forgiving, she wandered into Adam's arms and he's been struck by the same thunderbolt that hit me when I saw you. Wouldn't that solve my problems?"

The corner of her mouth twitched.

"Oh, nay. I have it. She wandered into the forest and the fae mistook her for one of their own—the wicked banshee—and she is never to return."

Adrienne laughed and was immediately rewarded with one of the Hawk's devastating smiles.

He was melting her, disarming her defenses. And it felt good.

More seriously he said, "I instructed the guards to see to Olivia's return journey the moment her horses are rested enough to make the ride."

Adrienne's spirit elevated at his words.

"Adrienne." He sighed her name like a rich port, complex and sweet. "It's only you—"

"Stop!"

Abruptly his mood changed, lightened like quicksilver. "I want to take you somewhere. Come, lass. Give me this night to show you who I really am. That's all I ask."

Adrienne's mind shrieked a resounding no... but perhaps it wasn't too dangerous. *Let me show you who I really am...* how intriguing.

You mean besides beautiful beyond bearing?

But what harm could there be in conversation?

"What harm could there be in conversation, Adrienne?"

Adrienne blinked. He must have plucked the words right out of her mind.

"Look, Adrienne, the moon comes out, peeping from behind the rowans." The Hawk pointed, and her eyes followed. Down the muscled curve of his arm, over his strong hand to the shining moon beyond.

"Cool silver orb that guides the night's slumber," Hawk mused softly. "I wager you sleep little on such nights as this, lass, when a storm hovers, threatening to break through the fragile night. Do you feel it? As if the very air is charged with tension? A storm threatening has always stirred a restlessness in me."

Adrienne could feel herself weakening with each word, beguiled by his enchanting brogue.

"'Tis a restlessness I feel in you as well. Walk with me, Adrienne. You'll never sleep if you return to the castle now."

The Hawk stood, hand outstretched, gazing down at her with promises in his eyes. Not touching her, just waiting for her to choose, to commit—if only to walking with him. His breath was shallow and expectant. Her fingers twitched hesitantly beneath the heat of his smiling eyes—eyes with tiny lines at the outer corners. Eberhard hadn't had any wrinkles. She could never trust a man without a few wrinkles about his eyes. He hadn't lived and laughed enough if he didn't have a few faint creases. How had she failed to notice the fine lines of life on the Hawk's face?

"Give yourself this moment, lass," he breathed huskily. "Try."

Adrienne's hand slipped like a whisper into his and she felt him jerk at their contact. His ebony eyes flared, and she felt the exquisite sensation of his strong fingers closing over hers. He swayed forward and she felt the brush of his lips

skim her cheek, an unspoken thank-you for the chance that pushed no further.

"I used to walk here when I was a boy..." He took her hand and steered her westward, away from the circle of rowans and the forest's edge.

Tell her about yourself, he thought. About the boy you used to be before you went away. About who you couldn't wait to be when you got back. But most especially—make her love you before she discovers who you were in between. Love still might not be enough to make her understand, but then at least there's a chance.

They talked and strolled while the Hawk wove his wild tales of boyhood impetuosity and bravery and she laughed into the gentle breeze. They sat atop the cliff's edge and tossed pebbles down into the surf, the crisp salt air tangling her silvery-blond mane with his raven silk. He showed her where he'd hung a hammock, just over the edge and down a man's length, and he made her laugh at how he used to hide there from Lydia. Lying on his back, his arms folded behind his head he would watch the sea and dream while his mother searched the bailey for hours, her lilting voice demanding he return.

Adrienne told him about the nuns and the sultry streets of New Orleans, even got him to say it like the locals did a time or two. N'Awlins. And he listened without chiding her for believing such fantasy. Whether he believed she was weaving tall tales or he somehow placed it all in the context of the sixteenth century, she didn't know. All she did know was that he listened to her like a man had never listened before. So she told him about Marie Leveau the voodoo queen and Jean Laffite the famous pirate, and the great plantations that once stood with their magnificent sprawling houses and the scents and sounds of Bourbon Street. When she spoke of the jazz, the lover's croon of a deep sax, the trumpeting blare of the brass horns, her eyes grew deep with mystery and sensual arousal, and he found he could almost believe she *was* from another time. Surely from another land.

"Kiss me, lass."

"I... shouldn't."

Her breathless, husky murmur enchanted him. "Is it so bad then?"

Adrienne drew a deep breath. She stood up, moved away from him, and tipped her head back to study the sky. The night had cleared; the cloud cover had furled out to sea and the storm had passed without breaking. The sound of the surf ebbed and flowed below them in unfaltering rhythm. Stars pierced the mantle of night and Adrienne tried to locate the Big Dipper when suddenly a small, bright star seemed to shiver, then plummeted from the sky.

"Look!" she said excitedly. "A falling star!"

Hawk surged to his feet. "Whatever you do, don't wish, lass."

She turned a pure, glowing smile his way, and it dazzled him so completely that for a moment he couldn't think. "Why ever not, Hawk?"

"They come true," he finally managed.

Her gaze fled back to the falling star. Adrienne held her breath and wished with all her might. *Please let something very good happen to me soon. Please!* Unable to say the words even beneath her breath, she willed her vision to the stars.

He sighed. "What did you wish?"

"You can't tell," Adrienne informed him pertly. "It's against the rules."

Hawk cocked a questioning brow. "What rules, lass?"

"You know—the wishing-on-a-star rules," she informed him in a tone that said *everybody* knew those rules. "So what *did you* wish that came true?"

Hawk snorted. "You just told me I'm not allowed to tell."

Adrienne rolled her eyes and made an impatient sound. "That's only *until* they come true. Then you can tell anyone you want." Her eyes blazed with curiosity. "So—out with it." She pushed lightly at his chest.

Hawk stared at Adrienne with fascination. Over the space of this wishing-on-a-star conversation, his wife seemed to have slid backward over the years. In her unfettered gaze, Hawk could clearly discern the trusting child she had once been.

"It's not what I wished, rather what a friend of mine wished upon me," Hawk

said softly.

"And that was?" Adrienne urged.

Hawk almost laughed aloud; he half thought she might box his ears if he didn't answer her quickly enough for her liking. "Kiss me, Adrienne," he said huskily, "prove to me it's not true. That a friend can't curse you with a wish upon a falling star."

"Come on, Hawk, tell me what his wish was!" Laughter lilted on her lush, pouty lips, and he wanted to kiss her until she made all his private wishes come true.

"Will you kiss me, then?" he bartered.

"Oh! Everything's a deal isn't it?"

Hawk shrugged. "Tit for tat, lass. 'Tis the way of this world. If a villein has beans and no meat, he finds someone with meat and no beans. I'm merely offering you a mutually satisfying trade."

"Do I get coffee too?" she asked shrewdly. "Tomorrow morning? For the kiss tonight? Toll troll paid in advance?"

"Och, wee lassie, who taught you to drive such a hard bargain?" But if he had his way, he'd coax enough sweet kisses from her tonight that he'd need only roll over in the morning to kiss her again. In his bed.

"Was that a yes, Hawk?"

"Cease and desist, lass! Shoot me another one of those beguiling looks and I'll be giving you my buttery with the coffee and perhaps toss in a few horses."

"I have your word, then?"

"You have my word and my pledge."

"Deal." Adrienne sealed their bargain hastily. Answers, coffee, and the excuse for a kiss. How could she ask for more? "My answer first," she demanded.

Hawk's great dark head fell forward, his mouth to her ear. Shivers slid up her back when his breath fanned her neck. "What? I can't hear you?" she said, as he

mumbled something indistinct.

"It's really too foolish to bear repeating..."

"A deal's a deal, Hawk!" she complained, shivering violently as his lips grazed her neck again and again.

Hawk groaned. "He wished for me the perfect wife. That my wife would be all that I ever dared dream of... all I ever hoped for. And then he wished that she would refuse to love me. Refuse to touch me. Refuse to share my bed."

"Why would a friend wish such a thing?" she asked indignantly.

"Why would a wife do such a thing?" he countered smoothly against the tender lobe of her ear.

She felt the tip of his tongue against her skin, and wondered why herself. Why would a wife say no to this impossibly beautiful, intriguing man?

Her pulse quickened; she turned her head and stared straight into burnished ebony eyes of unfathomable depths. Bewildered by the flush and quiver of emotion, she touched a finger to his perfectly sculpted lips. Her mind cried out to identify this new feeling, to control it, but her body demanded that she know him in a sense that had nothing to do with reason or logic.

"Let me love you, lass. I won't take anything you don't wish to give." His eyes lingered on her face, a seductive visual caress that heated her blood, and she wondered what might have been—if she'd only met him when she'd still believed in happily ever after. What would it feel like to let him run his beautiful strong hands all over her shaking body, to be kissed and teased and finally completed with the raw, pulsing steel of his hunger. Her senses were overwhelmed by the Hawk; the spicy, male scent of him, the silky feel of his hair, the rock-hard press of his body against hers.

I'll stop him in just a moment, she promised herself as he scattered kisses along her jaw. *One kiss on his lips was the deal*, she reminded herself.

Her conscience momentarily assuaged, she permitted the glorious rasp of his callused palms against her skin, the whisper of his shadow beard against her neck.

Suddenly she was doing more than permitting. Her arms crept up to circle his neck. She buried her fingers in his silky dark hair, then slid them down his neck to his powerful shoulders, tracing the contours of each sculpted muscle.

Adrienne drew a shaky, bewildered breath. She couldn't get enough oxygen in her lungs, but that ceased to matter as Hawk replaced her need for air with a need for his lips, a need for his tongue, a need for his need of her.

"I am the one, lass," he warned her softly. "It all stops here. With me. The best and last. Oh, definitely your last."

My last, she reluctantly acknowledged, for she doubted that any other man could match this one.

In that breathless moment, the past blurred into utter insignificance. It was as if Eberhard had never touched her, as if the twentieth century had never existed. As if all her life she had been heading toward this moment. This man. This magic.

Hawk traced kisses across her jaw, over every inch of her face; her nose, her eyelids as they fluttered closed, her brows, and then he stopped, his sensual lips hovering a flicker of a tongue away from hers. Would she? Dare she?

Adrienne's tongue flickered out and she tasted the man she'd wanted since the moment she'd laid fascinated eyes on him. "Oh my," she whispered. She wanted him, wanted this, more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life. A husky sound rumbled deep in his throat; he splayed his hand at the base of her neck and arched her head back to receive his kisses. The pink tip of his tongue circled her lips, tasted every corner, every fullness, teased her senseless; until it was too much for her, and her lips relaxed beneath his, molded to his, opened for him as her whole body seemed to be opening and crying for him. She was the bud of a rose, unfurling to the golden heat of the sun. "Magnificent," she whispered, unaware that she'd spoken her thoughts aloud.

But the Hawk wasn't unaware—he heard her one word and desire slammed through him so savagely that he shuddered. Hot and hard, ruthlessly, the Hawk moved his mouth over hers. He slanted across her lips with a relentless hunger that caused stars to shimmer behind her shut eyes.

Adrienne's eyes flew open for the sheer pleasure of looking at him and she saw

that he was looking directly into them with such a smoldering promise of passion that she whimpered against his mouth.

Hundreds of feet below, nature conspired with the raw, unquenchable mystery of passion in its rhythm; the sensual tempo of the waves as billions of gallons of water came in with a fury, then eased out. Wave after wave of sensation crashed over Adrienne; she was adrift in a sea of such passion that she literally felt herself being reshaped, molded to this man's touch, just as the rocks below her were molded by the ocean's relentless caress.

The Hawk's tongue was hot silk, exploring her mouth, teasing her tongue. "Oh," she whispered, "I never knew..."

"Is kissing me so bad, then, lass?"

"It's not the kissing that's bad..." Her words were lost in a soft moan as she tipped her head back for more kisses.

"What's bad, my heart?" Hawk nipped her neck, gently.

"Oooh!... you!"

"Me? I'm bad?" He wouldn't let her answer for a long moment while he nibbled at her lower lip, teased it, sucked it into his mouth, then slowly released it.

Adrienne drew a shaky breath. "Well... I mean... you *are* a man..."

"Yes," he encouraged.

"And very beautiful at that..."

"Mmm... yes?"

"And I hate beautiful men..." Her hands moved over his shoulders, his broad muscled back, and tapered down over his tight waist to his muscular buttocks. She was shocked at her own daring, thrilled by the groan of pleasure she coaxed from him.

"I can tell. Hate me just like *that*, lass. Hate me like that again. Hate me all you need to hate me."

In one fluid motion, the Hawk tumbled her gently to the ground and stretched his hard body over hers. Adrienne was amazed; she'd never been this intimate with Eberhard, never experienced anything like it before, this heady feeling of lying beneath a man. How tantalizing it was: the thrust of her breasts against his broad chest; the possessive way he snared and kept one of her legs between his; the ridge of his enormous cock against the curve of her thigh. When he shifted his weight so that rigid muscle rode rock-hard between her legs, the heat simmering between them flared, causing muscles to clench inside her she hadn't known she possessed. He rotated his hips, rubbing in slow erotic circles against her. She felt light-headed, disoriented by the sensations he evoked. She arched against him, wrapping a leg over him to pull him closer—to trap the heated man of him snug in the ache between her thighs.

He tugged gently at the bodice of her gown and slid it down over her shoulders, baring her breasts for his attentive expertise. "Beautiful," he murmured, his fingers teasing the puckered crests. When he circled the rosy peaks with his tongue, tendrils of fire radiated through her body, culminating in exquisite heat in her belly, and lower still.

"Oh my God!" Adrienne tossed her head in the fragrant grass and threaded her fingers possessively through his dark mane.

Hawk groaned, his hot breath fanning her breast. "How do you do this to me, lass?" She was all he'd ever dreamed he might one day have, then counseled himself sternly to give up the dreaming as a foolish lad's fancy.

But now he felt very much like that foolish lad again.

He almost laughed at the rightness of it. After all the women he'd had, he *loved this* one. The full enormity of his realization astounded and delighted him; he lowered his lips to hers, demanding wordlessly that she love him back. He put every ounce of longing, every shred of roguish seduction at his disposal into that silent plea—he kissed her so deeply, he no longer knew where he ended and she began. Her hips yielded when he thrust against her and rose hungrily to find his when he drew back. Primitive sounds escaped her lips, which were swollen and plum-colored from his fierce kisses.

"Love me, Adrienne," he commanded roughly. "Love me!"

Her only reply was a throaty moan.

"Tell me you want me, lass," he demanded hungrily against her lips.

"Please..." came her choked reply as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut. *I'll stop him in just a minute. It will be easier if I don't look at him.*

"Do you want me, Adrienne?" Hawk asked, pulling back from their kiss. Her plea wasn't enough of an answer; he had to hear her say the words. That even with her eyes closed, she knew it was *him* on top of her, *him* kissing her.

But she didn't answer, and her eyes remained shut.

Hawk groaned and kissed her again anyway, losing himself for a moment in the texture and taste of her sweet lips. But doubt hammered at him. He was aware that if he didn't push the issue, he might yet carry her to his bed tonight in her sensual, drunken arousal. But he didn't want Adrienne incoherent. He wanted her wide-awake, fully aware and asking him to touch her. He wanted her to meet his gaze levelly with honest, unabashed hunger, and say the words. Hawk tore his mouth from hers, panting hard.

"Open your eyes, Adrienne." He forced himself to lie still; his hips rigid against the seductive arch of her body.

A wordless moment of shallow breaths passed, their lips inches apart.

"Look at me. Say my name. Now," Hawk commanded.

Adrienne's eyes opened just a sliver. *Don't make me acknowledge this... don't ask so much!* they pleaded. And again, her body quested upward, begging him to move atop her, to seduce her in her drunken arousal so that tomorrow she could pretend it hadn't been her choice.

"Look at me and say my name." His voice broke harshly on the words. His beautiful, chiseled mouth hovered only a whisper away from hers.

Adrienne stared up at him mutely. Tears stung her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks.

"Why can't you do it?" he demanded, his brogue rough velvet over broken glass. "Is it so impossible? Sidheach. That's all you have to say. Or James, even Lyon.

Laird Douglas would do!" Anything but Adam.

Adrienne stared, revulsion at her own weakness choking her. She'd learned nothing! One more inch, one scant movement, and she would be lost as never before. *Where the body goes... the heart will follow... say his name and kiss him again, then you can just kiss your soul goodbye. This man has the power to destroy you in ways Eberhard never could.*

"What will it take to make you forget him?"

And he thought it was Adam, but it wasn't Adam. It was Eberhard. And there would be nothing left of her this time if she played the fool again.

"Say my name, lass, for the love of God!" Hawk roared. He was shaking with a mixture of barely restrained passion and disbelief that she could respond to him so erotically, so completely, yet still withhold his name. "If there is any chance for me at all, Adrienne, call out to me! If you can't even say my name, then I stand no chance of ever gaining your love!"

His last plea was the agonized cry of a wounded animal; it laid open her heart.

A pulse throbbed in his neck and she raised her hand to place trembling fingers against it. Harder and harder she steeled her heart, until it was safe again behind a glacier of remembrance and regret.

He pushed her hand away.

"Say it." He forced his demand through gritted teeth.

"Now isn't this just *sooo* touching. I'll help her." Olivia's voice dripped venom.

"Just call him the king's whore," she purred. "That's all *we* ever called him."

* * * * *

The storm raging in him stilled at precisely that moment.

"Is it true?" Adrienne finally whispered, her eyes wide and deep with hurt. Hurt and something else. Hawk saw the unspoken cry in her slate depths. He wanted to deny it, to explain the nightmare away. But he would not lie to this lass. She would have to take him in full truth or not at all; when she accepted him, if he even had any chance left, she would possess him entirely. Bitterness welled up,

cloaking him in a despair so complete he almost cried aloud with the agony of it.

"I was called the king's whore," he replied stiffly.

Shadows leapt and flickered in her opalescent silver eyes. Darkness he had vowed to ease, he had fed with his own hands.

He rolled from her and rose slowly, then walked away into the night as silent as a wolf, leaving her on the edge of a precipice with his vengeful ex-mistress. He hoped she'd simply push the spiteful Olivia over the edge, but he knew it was not going to be that easy. For if he judged rightly, his wife would be in Adam's bed in no time now.

She was lost to him.

Better that he had never met this lass so that he might never have known the sweet rush of emotion, the absolving passion, the freeing wings of what love might have been.

He wandered that night, lost in memories of that time when he had been commanded by his king. All for Dalkeith and his mother, for Ilysse and Adrian. Aye, and fair Scotia from time to time when his king had been wildly foolish. Nay, there had never really been any choice.

Hawk's eyes searched the night sky for yet another falling star. He intended to wish upon every one for the rest of his life if necessary. Surely ten thousand wishes could undo one. But the cloud cover had returned and there wasn't one flicker of a star to be seen in the absolute darkness that surrounded him.



CHAPTER 17

"OH MY DEAR, I THOUGHT YOU KNEW!" OLIVIA GUSHED.

"Go to hell," Adrienne said softly as she forced herself to her feet.

"I'm trying to help you—"

"No you're not. The only person you're trying to help is yourself—to a heaping helping of my husband."

"Ah, yes. Your precious husband. Have you no curiosity about his time at court?" Olivia purred invitingly.

"Do you really think I'm stupid enough to believe you would tell me any truth about him? A woman like you?"

Olivia stopped midsentence, her mouth hanging slightly ajar. "And just what is that supposed to mean?"

Adrienne's slate-gray eyes coolly met Olivia's heavily kohled ovals. "Just that you're the kind of woman who measures her success by the men she beds and the women she bites and one day soon, and not too far off from the look of you, you're going to be nothing but a plump, unwanted old woman with no friends. And then how are you going to pass the time?" Olivia might have taken her in years ago, but not much fooled her anymore.

"How dare you, *you petite salope!*" Olivia spit out. "I was only offering my help —"

"By following us, spying on us, and then bringing up his past? His past is gone, Olivia." Adrienne wasn't aware she was defending him until she heard herself doing it. "Some people learn from their past, grow better and wiser. My Hawk has done that. You're just angry because you know he's not the man he used to be. If he was, he would have stayed in the gardens with you instead of spending the evening talking with me."

"Talking? He and I used to... talk... like that too. He's just temporarily inflamed with a new body. He'll get over it. And when he does, he'll come back to my

bed."

"You're wrong," Adrienne said calmly. "And you know it. That's what really upsets you."

"Old dogs do not learn new tricks, sweet young fool," Olivia sneered.

Adrienne flashed a saccharin smile at the older woman. "Perhaps not. But sometimes dogs give up their old tricks *entirely*."

"You speak like a woman in love. Yet you wouldn't say his name," Olivia declared, arching a penciled brow.

Adrienne's smile faded. "I speak for both myself and my husband when I suggest you leave Dalkeith at first light, whether the horses are rested or not. You are no longer welcome here. Don't ever come back."

* * * * *

I sure can pick 'em, can't I? she brooded as she picked her way through the garden.

Just as with Eberhard, the boat-deck-tanned playboy elite who'd manipulated her so flawlessly, she'd been a fool for a beautiful illusion. The real beauty had to come from inside. A man called the king's whore... well, what kind of beauty was there in that?

Worse yet was the thought of what she'd been about to do, would have willingly done with the Hawk, if Olivia hadn't come along. His pleas had virtually undone her defenses, and she knew full well that had Olivia not interrupted them, she would even now be lying beneath his magnificent body, just another one of the king's whore's conquests.

Maybe it's not like that, Adrienne. Maybe you don't know the whole story, a small voice in her heart pointed out.

Maybe I don't want to know the whole story, she seethed. She clenched her hands until she felt the painful tear of nails in the soft flesh of her palms. *I want to go home,* she mourned like a lost child. *I want Moonie.*

That's the only thing that's worth wanting back there, she thought.

She blew out a frustrated breath.

"Adrienne." His voice came out of the shadows of the lower bailey so softly that she thought at first she must have imagined it.

She whirled to meet his gaze. Moonlight fell in wide shafts through the trees, casting a silver bar across his chiseled face.

"Leave me alone, Hawk."

"What did Olivia tell you?" The words sounded as though they were ripped from him against his will.

"Why don't you go ask her? It seems the two of you communicated quite well in the past. A sort of 'wordless communication,' if I recall."

"Lass, don't," he groaned.

"Why not? Does the truth hurt?"

"Adrienne, it wasn't like that. It wasn't..." His voice trailed off and he sighed.

"It wasn't what?" she said icily. Adrienne waited. Would he explain? The word *whore* could have a variety of meanings, none of them savory. She knew he'd been with beautiful women, and a lot of them from what the Comyn maids had told her, but just how many? A thousand? Ten thousand?

When the Hawk didn't reply, Adrienne pushed. "Are you Olivia's lover?"

"No, lass!"

"Were you?" Adrienne forced herself to ask.

Hawk sighed. "It's true, but it was a long time ago, and you don't know the circumstances—"

Adrienne glared. "I don't want to know the circumstances under which you would be with a woman like her! If you had any discrimination at all, you would never... You men are all the same!"

Hawk's brogue thickened measurably. "Give me a chance, Adrienne. Hear me out. 'Tisna fair to be hating me for things other men may have done to you. One

more chance—that's all I'm asking of you, lass."

"I've given you too many chances! Leave me alone, Hawk Douglas. Just leave me alone!" Adrienne spun around and raced for the castle before she could humiliate herself by bursting into tears.

* * * * *

She dreamed of the Hawk and the promise she had glimpsed in his eyes. The hope. If he knew her past, would he still want *her*? Adrienne's slumbering psyche struggled mightily with the lot of it. Dare she let herself love him? Dare she not? Her heart was still too bruised. Her mind recoiled from any possibility of further shame and regret. But the temptation to fall grew harder to resist every day. If only she were home in her cocoon of solitude. Safe again, but so lonely...

Dreaming within a dream, she finally remembered how she'd come to be there, and understood how she might get back home. The way to escape the Hawk and all his infinite promises of passion and pain.

She was awakened by the impact of the memory. Disentangling herself from the silken sheets, she crossed the room and peered out into the inky night.

Eberhard's chess set.

She could finally recall with perfect clarity what she'd been doing moments before she'd been catapulted through time to land on the Comyn's lap.

She'd been in her library, picking up the pieces of Eberhard's chess set.

That dratted chess set really *was* cursed. When she'd swiped it from Eberhard's house, she'd been careful not to touch the pieces. Eberhard had often joked about the curse, but Adrienne preferred to give legends, curses, and myths a wide berth. After she'd pilfered the set, she had left it packed, intending to unpack it only if she needed to sell it.

She knew she'd had the black queen in her hand when she'd appeared on Red Comyn's lap, but where had it gone from there? She certainly didn't have it now. Had one of the maids taken it? Would she have to confront the despicable Red Comyn to get it back?

She shook her head dejectedly. It had to be *somewhere* at the Comyn keep, and

wherever it was she had to make an effort to find it. It could take her home.

Could she find her way back to the Comyn keep?

Of course, she assured herself. After traveling scrubby backroads for two thousand miles, Adrienne de Simone could find her way anywhere. But quickly, while she was still under cover of the night. And before her resolve weakened.

* * * * *

Thirty minutes later she was ready. Tiptoeing through the kitchen, she'd found an oiled sack and filled it with crusty breads and cheeses and a few apples. Tavis snored in his chair by the door, his hand furred about a half-full glass of—she sniffed cautiously—pure grain alcohol from the smell of it. After a quick stop in the Green Lady's room where she'd left the boots Lydia had given her, she'd be ready to go.

Slipping from the kitchen, she moved quickly down the short corridor and pushed open the door to the Green Lady's room. Her eyes flared with dismay. There the Hawk slept, a white linen sheet wrapped around his legs, his torso bare to the dawn's caress. His dark head tossed against the white pillows, and he slept alone—grasping in his arms the dress she'd worn that day she'd taken the dart.

They called him the king's whore, she reminded herself. Perhaps there was actually a royal appointment to such a post. Or perhaps he was simply so nondiscriminating that he'd earned the title all by himself. Regardless, she would never again be one of many.

Adrienne spied her boots on the wooden chest at the foot of the bed. Eyes carefully averted from her sleeping husband, she slipped them from the burnished pine lid and skittered back toward the door on kitten paws, closing it gently behind her.

And now the difficult part. Guards were posted all over the castle. She would have to flee through the gardens, down the eternal bridge to the gatehouse, and through the east tower. She'd run from worse things, through worse climes before. She would manage somehow. She always did when it came to running.

* * * * *

Hawk slit one eye open and watched her leave. He muttered darkly and

shifted his body, folding his muscular arms behind his head. He stared at the door a long moment.

She was leaving him?

Never. Not so long as he lived and breathed, and he had a hell of a lot more fight in him than she must think.

He moved to his feet and grabbed his kilt, knotting it loosely at his waist.

So that's the way it was going to be, he mused bitterly. The first sign of something less than savory in his past, and she would run. He hadn't pegged her as the skittish type. He'd thought there was a lass of fiery mettle beneath her silken exterior, but one breath of his sordid past and she was ready to leave him. After the pleasure she'd so obviously experienced in his arms, still—to walk away.

Well, where the hell did she think he'd learned how to give pleasure?

Oh, nay. The next time his wife lay in his arms, and there would be a next time, he would take one of the gypsy potions to make him detached. Then he would truly show her the benefits she reaped from the past she eschewed so violently.

He was offering her his love, freely and openly. He, who had never offered anything more than physical pleasure for a short time to any lass, was offering this woman his life.

And still she would not accept him.

And she didn't even know the first bloody thing about what it meant to be the king's whore. Olivia had been about to tell her, there in the gardens. Olivia, who had ruthlessly exploited the Hawk's servitude to the king by petitioning James to command the Hawk to grant her those carnal favors he'd previously denied her. Olivia, who had given James a whole new way to humiliate the Hawk. The memory of it shamed and enraged him. He banished such thoughts and the blinding anger they generated with a firm flexing of his formidable will.

Adrienne was his immediate problem. Hawk snorted. Was she running off to discover the world in her smithy's arms?

Aye. He was sure she was.

At that moment Grimm pushed the door open and ducked his head in, a silent question in his eyes.

"Is she headed north?" Hawk's face was bitter.

"Nay," Grimm puzzled. " 'Tis what I expected too, but she goes east."

"To the gatehouse? Alone?"

"Aye. Carrying only a wee pack."

"He must be meeting her there," Hawk mused. "The guard is following?"

"Aye, at a distance. Until you give your command."

Hawk turned his back and studied the dying embers. His command. Should he let her go? Could he? And if she joined with Adam how would he keep himself from killing the smithy with his bare hands? No. Better to stop her before he had to know with absolute certainty her betrayal. "What have you learned of Adam?" Hawk kicked at the hearth.

"Nothing, Hawk. 'Tis as if he blew in on a fae breeze and put down roots. It's the oddest thing. No one knows from whence he came. I think Esmerelda is our best bet for information, as she warms his bed. But I haven't been able to track her down just yet." Grimm rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Seems Esmerelda's people have moved their camp away from the north rowans to the far east pastures."

Hawk spun on his heel, his dark eyes searching Grimm's intently. "The Rom never move camp. They always stay in the north pastures through the summer."

"Not this summer." Grimm shrugged. "Verily odd. Said even the Samhain would be celebrated at a new site this harvest."

"Strange." Hawk pondered this new oddity. But he spared only a moment to consider the Gypsy tribe that camped Dalkeith—there were more important issues to attend to. His wife was leaving him. "Stop her at the gatehouse, Grimm. I'll be there shortly."

* * * * *

Adrienne knew she was being followed.

Escaping the castle was as hard as trying to break out of a prison. She had less chance of evading the guards than she had of wishing herself back to the twentieth century. This time she didn't even have a gun.

Like the night Eberhard had died—a night she'd promised herself never to think of again.

She hadn't meant for any of it to happen. She hadn't even known what was going on until the night she'd finally discovered why Eberhard had been sending her on all those solitary vacations. *So lovely and stupidly gullible*. Wasn't that how she'd heard him describe her that night she'd returned unexpectedly from London, hoping to surprise him?

And surprise him she had.

Slipping in the back door of the garage and into his luxurious home, Adrienne overheard a conversation not meant for her ears.

A conversation he would have killed her for hearing.

She hadn't called out his name as she'd placed her hand on the door to his den. Gerard's voice carried clearly through the door.

"Did Rupert meet her in London?"

Adrienne froze. They were talking about her. How had they known that Rupert was in London? She'd just met him there yesterday. She hadn't even called Eberhard and discussed anything with him yet. She'd come back on the redeye and it had taken all day and half the night to get home. She pressed her ear to the door, listening curiously.

Eberhard laughed. "Just as we'd planned. He told her he was in town to buy a gift for his wife. You know Adrienne, she'd believe anything. She didn't notice a thing when he swapped her luggage. She's so lovely and gullible. You were right about her from the first, Gerard. She's the perfect pigeon. And she'll never catch on to what we're doing until it's too late to matter."

Adrienne jerked violently, her hand frozen on the door.

"And when she finally gets caught, Eb? What will you do then?"

Eberhard's laughter chilled her blood. "Ah, that's the beauty of it. They'll dig up the records from the orphanage. I took the liberty of having them doctored a bit. They now reflect a juvenile delinquent with a natural inclination toward criminal behavior. She'll take the fall alone. There's not a cop in my fair city who'd try to pin anything on Mr. Eberhard Darrow Garrett—generous political patron. I never leave the Kingdom of N'Awlins. She's the one always in and out of the country."

Adrienne's eyes were wide with horror. *What was he saying?*

Gerard laughed. "We got a huge shipment out in her Mercedes last month, Eb. The Acapulco run was nothing but brilliant."

Shipment? Adrienne wondered frantically. Shipment of what? She backed soundlessly away from the door.

Stupid. Gullible. Innocent. What was so bad about being innocent? she wondered as she slunk through the darkened house, swallowing her sobs. At least there was honor in innocence. At least she never hurt anyone, never used anyone. So maybe she was a tad... gullible. Maybe she even lacked a bit of common sense. But she more than made up for it in other departments. She had a good heart. That should count for something.

Her throat tightened with suppressed tears. Stop it, she chided herself. Focus. Find the queen. Get back home. They don't make men like the Hawk in the twentieth century, and after the Hawk no man would ever be a temptation again.

The gatehouse loomed before her. Why hadn't they stopped her? She knew they were still there. Maybe he wanted them to let her go. Maybe she'd been so naive and unschooled that he really wasn't interested at all. After all, a man like that certainly wouldn't have a hard time finding a willing woman.

What would the king's whore care? There would always be another woman.

She kicked angrily at a pebble and watched it skitter into the wall of the gatehouse. Would they pull up the portcullis and draw back the sally port for her? Roll out the red carpet to celebrate her leave-taking?

And as she stepped into the archway, Grimm melted out of the shadows.

She stopped, relieved.

Try that again, she told herself. Write that scene one more time, Adrienne de Simone. It reads, "she stopped, furious at being denied escape."

No, definitely relieved.

She sighed, her shoulders drooping. "Grimm. Let me pass. It's my life. Move."

He shook his head. "Sorry, milady."

"Grimm, I must go back to the Comyn keep."

"Why?"

She studied him a moment in the breaking light. He looked truly confused, and his eyes kept scanning the northern bailey, as if he was expecting someone.

"Because I'm homesick," she lied. Well, perhaps not exactly a lie—she *did miss* Moonie terribly.

"Ah!" Understanding dawned in his handsome features. He stood before her, his legs apart, muscular arms folded across his chest. "Are you looking for something?"

"What?" He couldn't know! Could he? "Grimm, did Lady Comyn—I mean my mother—say anything about... well... anything of mine that I might have left there... at home?"

"Like what?" Grimm asked, the veritable picture of innocence.

"Yes, like what?" echoed a voice behind her. Something in his voice had decidedly changed and for the worse. The Hawk's velvet purr had taken on the coldness of smooth, polished steel.

Was she responsible for that change?

"Take her to the Peacock Room. Lock the door and bring me the key, Grimm."

"No!" she cried, spinning around to face him. "I must go! I want to go to the Comyn keep!"

"What seek you, wife?" he asked icily.

Mute, she stared at him defiantly.

Hawk muttered a dark curse. Could it be true? Could she truly be from the future and looking for the way back home? The thought that she might leave him for Adam had made him near crazed.

But, he brooded darkly, if it was the black queen she was seeking, then she was most definitely doing it for a reason. Odds were she was from somewhere else if not some *when* else, and she thought the black queen could take her away from him.

One way to find out, he decided.

"Is it this you're after, lass?" he asked as he withdrew the chess piece from his sporran and raised it before her widening eyes.

CHAPTER 18

"COME, LASS." THE COMMAND WAS TONELESS AND UNMISTAKABLY dangerous. And even now, the mere word made her shiver with desire. The flush of heat stole her breath. "Hawk—"

"Don't." The word was a warning. "Now. Take my hand."

What was he going to do? she wondered frantically. Behind her, she felt Grimm step closer, edging her toward the Hawk.

"Wait!" She held out a hand to ward him off.

"Move, milady," Grimm said softly.

"Don't lock me in a room!"

"How could I not?" Hawk sneered. "Knowing that you would go back to a place where it seems you knew little joy—yet you would rather be there than here with me!"

"You don't believe I'm from the future!" she gasped.

"I'm beginning to," he muttered. "How do you think I knew about this?" The black queen glittered in his hand.

She shrugged. "How?"

"You, my sweet wife, talked about it when you were poisoned. Worried and fretted and tried to find it—"

"But I only just remembered."

"Your sleeping mind remembered sooner."

"But how *did you* get it?"

It was Grimm who told her. "The Lady Comyn saw it fall from your hand the night she claims you arrived."

"But how—"

"Lady Comyn entrusted it to me after the wedding. I gave it to the Hawk."

"She admitted that you're not her blood daughter. I can see no reason why she would lie on that score." *Unless Comyn keep is suffering some strange contagious madness*, he thought grimly. "Will it truly take you back to wherever you came from?" the Hawk asked carefully.

"I think so. As far as I can tell, it's what brought me here," she said, her gaze cast upon the cobbled walkway.

"And your plan was to get it and go home, lass? You planned to slip from Dalkeith, by yourself?"

"No! With your mother, Hawk!" she snapped absurdly. "Of course by myself!"

"So you were going to go to Comyn keep to get this chess piece and try to go back to wherever you came from? That was your plan this evening?" She missed the warning in his careful tone.

"Yes, Hawk. I admit it. All right? I was going to try. I'm not certain it will work, but it's the last thing I had in my hand before I ended up here, and legend says the chess set is cursed. It's the only thing I can think of that might have done it. If it brought me here, it might just take me back."

The Hawk smiled coolly. He turned the queen in his hand, studying it carefully. "Viking," he mused. "Beautiful piece. Well worked and well preserved."

"Do you believe me now, Hawk?" She needed to know. "That I really am from the future?"

"Suffice it to say—I don't believe in taking any chances." He still didn't quite believe, but infinitely better safe than sorry.

He turned sharply on his heel and stalked off toward the gardens. "Bring her, Grimm," he called over his shoulder, almost as an afterthought.

But Grimm didn't have to take her anywhere. A thousand warning bells clanged in her head, and she raced off behind him to catch up. His careful tone, his steely demeanor, his questions. He'd been neatly tying things down to the absolute letter. The Hawk was not a man lacking intellect and purpose. She only hoped

she misunderstood his purpose now.

"Hawk!" she cried.

Hawk's shoulders tightened. He was beyond anger at this moment, he had slipped into the realm of icy resolve. He knew what he had to do as he broke into a run through the gardens, across the bailey, in the blushing Scottish morn. Until it was done, he couldn't afford to let her touch him, to put her sweet hands on his shoulders and beg. *I'll take no chances where my wife is concerned.*

"Wait!" Adrienne broke into a run, fear gripping her heart as she realized he was making a beeline for the northern edge of the bailey, where the forge was burning brightly.

"No, Hawk!" she screamed as he melted into the gardens.

Her feet flew as she plunged through the lush greenery, racing over the beds of anemones and purple iris. She leapt the low stone walls and pushed thorny rose branches from her face, tearing the soft palms of her hands until she erupted from the gardens only to see him a dozen lengths ahead of her.

Gasping for breath, she called on every ounce of fleet-footed strength she had. If she made it at all, it would be close—too close.

From a window high above, Lydia watched the scene unfold.

Pushing against the pain of her unwilling muscles, Adrienne desperately tried to catch up to Hawk, but it was too late—he already stood next to Adam near the brightly glowing embers.

Gasping, she lunged forward just as Grimm's hand closed upon her cape. He yanked hard on the fabric, pulling her backward. The cape ripped and she fell, crying out as she tumbled to the ground. "Hawk, don't!"

"Destroy this," Hawk commanded Adam.

"No!" Adrienne screamed.

Adam cast a momentary eye upon the felled beauty. "It would seem the lady feels otherwise."

"I didn't ask you to think, Adam Black, and I don't give a bloody damn what the lady thinks."

Adam smiled impishly. "I take it you have failed to jess the falcon, Lord Hawk?"

"Burn it, smithy. Lest I satisfy myself by incinerating you, rather than the queen."

"Adam! No!" Adrienne pleaded.

Adam seemed to ponder the situation a moment, then with an oddly triumphant look, he shrugged and tossed the piece into the forge.

To Adrienne, lying flat on the ground, everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

She watched in horror as the black queen soared through the air and sank into the glowing coals. Adrienne swallowed a sob as the flames licked greedily at the chess piece. Her only way out had been destroyed.

Hawk sighed his relief. Adrienne collapsed against the earth, staring blankly at the soil. The black queen was gone, the dense African wood no match for the blaze hot enough to forge steel.

No Moonie. No way home.

She was here in 1513—with him—forever.

Adam made a sound a shade too dark to be laughter as he leaned closer to the Hawk. Close enough that only the Hawk heard his low, mocking words. "She will warm my bed in no time at all now, fool Hawk."

Hawk flinched. The smithy was right. His wife would hate him for what he'd done.

"What the hell are you doing at the forge in the middle of the night anyway?" Hawk snapped.

Adam grinned impishly. "I am ever a merry wanderer of the night. Besides, one never knows what prime opportunity might present itself for the plucking."

Hawk snarled at the smithy.

Behind him, he heard Adrienne stagger to her unsteady feet. Her breathing was labored from her run, perhaps from shock as well. Bleakly, the Hawk studied the forge in rigid silence. Adrienne's voice trembled with fury.

"Know one thing, Lord Douglas, and it's all you'll ever need to know. Remember it, should you someday think I may have changed my mind. I won't. I *despise* you. You took from me what you had no right to take. And there's nothing you can *ever* do to earn my forgiveness. I *hate* you!"

"Despise me as you must," he said quietly, still staring at the forge. "But you can never leave me now. That's all that matters."

LUGHNASSADH

(Midsummer)

Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble...

SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*

CHAPTER 19

TWILIGHT CREPT UP FROM THE OCEAN AND OVER THE CLIFFS with purple impatience that stained the walls of Dalkeith a dusky crimson. In his study, Hawk watched the night seep through the open doors on the west end.

She stood on the cliff's edge, unmoving, her velvet cape tossing restlessly in the wind. What was she thinking as she gazed blindly out to sea?

He knew what *he'd* been thinking—that even the wind sought to unclothe her. He tortured himself with the memory of the sultry rose peaks he knew crowned her breasts beneath the silk of her gown. Her body had been shaped for this time, to wear clinging silks and rich velvets. To be a fine laird's lady. To mate a proud warrior.

What the hell was he going to do? Things couldn't go on like this.

He'd been trying to provoke her, hoping she'd make him angry so he could lose his head and punish her with his body. But time and again when he'd pushed she'd given him only cool civility, and a man couldn't do a bloody thing with that kind of response. He whirled from the door and squeezed his eyes shut to erase all haunting memory of the vision of his wife.

Weeks had passed since that day by the forge—weeks lush with fragile days and delicate dawns, ruby nights and midsummer storms. And in those passing days, those jewels of Scotia's summer, were a thousand sights he wanted to share with her.

Damn it! He pounded his fist upon his desk, sending papers fluttering and statues scurrying. She was his wife. She had no way back to wherever she'd come from! When was she going to accept that and make the most of it? He would give her anything she wanted. Anything but to leave him. Never that.

His existence had all the makings of a gilded, living hell and he could find no exit.

As swiftly as it had assailed him, his rage evaporated.

Adrienne, his lips formed the word silently. *How did we come to this impasse?*

How did I make such a mess of it?

* * * * *

"Walk with me, lass," he said softly, and she whirled upon the cliff's edge, a breathtaking flutter of silver and cobalt blue. His colors, the Douglas colors. Unwittingly, it seemed, she wore them often. Did she even know that she donned in vivid splashes the very threads of the Douglas tartan, and that no name could have branded her more certainly his lady?

He waved a dismissive hand at his guards. He needed to steal precious moments with her alone, before he left. After hours of struggling, he had reached many decisions. First and foremost being that he was long overdue for a visit to Uster, one of his many manors and the most troublesome. He simply couldn't keep neglecting his estates in his lovesick idiocy. The laird had to put in the occasional appearance and take an interest in resolving his villagers' concerns.

Besides, he was making no progress here. If she chose Adam in his absence, then he could just die inside and get on with the pretense of living. It was how he'd survived the first thirty-odd years. What kind of fool had he become to expect the rest to be any different?

"Laird Douglas," she clipped.

In silence they walked the cliff's edge together, toward the forest.

"I will be leaving for a time," he said finally as they entered the forest.

Adrienne stiffened. Was he serious? "Wh-where are you going?" And why did it disturb her so much?

He took a sharp, indrawn breath. "Uster."

"What is Uster anyway?"

"One of my manors. Seventeen manors belong to Dalkeith. Uster holds the villages of Duluth and Tanamorissey, and they are an intemperate lot. 'Twas a problem even when the king's men held Dalkeith."

When the king's men held Dalkeith.

When her husband had been the king's whore.

In the last weeks the heat of Adrienne's anger had cooled, leaving a poignant regret. Hawk had mostly avoided her, except for the occasional times he'd seemed to be trying to pick a fight with her for some reason. She'd half expected him to lock her in his room, but after that terrible night he had retreated carefully to his study by the sea.

There he'd stayed every night—so quiet, so beautiful, and so alone.

"Hawk?" she began tentatively.

"Yes?"

"What exactly did the king's whore do?"

Hawk stiffened. Could this be the chance he'd been waiting for? Perhaps he could dare to hope after all. His laughter was full of bitter self-mockery. "Are you quite certain you wish to know, lovely Adrienne?"

* * * * *

Lurking behind a towering oak, Esmerelda studied Adrienne's silvery-blond mane, silvery eyes, sparkling face. What did the Hawk see in that skinny, pale girl he couldn't find in Esmerelda's sultry embrace?

For the first time in weeks the guards were gone and the bitch walked unprotected enough that Esmerelda could strike and flee into the shelter of the dark forest. Her beloved Hawk might suffer a time of mourning, but he would find solace and sweet passion in Esmerelda's arms once the soil stilled upon his wife's grave.

She raised the arrow with a hand that trembled. Frowning, she dug the edge of the notched head into her fleshy palm until blood welled in her tawny-gold skin. She grimaced against the pain, but it steadied her nerves. This time she would *not* fail. Esmerelda had chosen her weapon carefully. Poison had proved too chancy—her drawn and corded bow would send the arrow flying true, with force enough to lodge in the flesh and bone of Adrienne's breast.

Esmerelda dropped to her knee and coiled the leather cord tighter. She notched the bow and took sight as Adrienne stepped into a clearing. She nearly faltered when she saw the look on Hawk's face as he gazed at his wife. He loved Adrienne as Esmerelda would have loved *him*; a wild, claiming, know-no-

bounds kind of passion. With this realization, any compassion Esmerelda may have felt for Adrienne evaporated. She steadied the bow and took aim at Adrienne's breast. With a soft *whoosh*, the arrow flew free. Esmerelda swallowed a frantic scream. At the last minute the Hawk turned, almost as if he saw her lurking in the shadows or sensed the arrow's flight. He moved. No!

* * * * *

"Ummmph!" Adrienne gasped as Hawk flung one powerful arm across her face and thrust her against a tree.

Adrienne struggled against his back, but he was an immovable mountain. Was this how he intended to win her back? After weeks of careful restraint, was he taking her into the forest to rape her?

"Oooof!" His breath hissed out softly, and she pushed harder at his back. "What are you doing, Hawk?" she demanded, but still he said nothing.

Hawk shuddered, battling the pain as his eyes scanned the trees. He felt his strength ebbing, but he couldn't give in to the weakness yet. Not until he found and stopped whoever was trying to kill his wife. But the bushes were still. The assailant, for whatever reason, had fled. Hawk felt relief rush through him as blood gushed from his wound.

When he swayed and crumpled at Adrienne's feet, she screamed and screamed.

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In the shadows, Esmerelda pressed a fist to her mouth. She could feel Hawk's eyes searching the very spot in which she cowered, but the shadows were too dense for even his eyes to penetrate.

He turned, and in profile she could see the arrow, still vibrating from the force of flight, just above his heart. She closed her eyes and swallowed tightly. She'd killed him! The arrow was wickedly notched and would be impossible to remove without ripping open his chest. She had deliberately designed it to do even more damage in the removing than in the entering. Even if it didn't kill the victim going in, it would certainly kill him coming out.

Esmerelda melted to the forest floor and crawled through the underbrush until she was certain she was safe. Then she surged to her feet and ran blindly, her

crossbow forgotten on the damp forest floor. Branches slapped her face. A scream gathered and clotted in her throat. Esmerelda swallowed a bitter sob as she leapt a fallen log.

A hand shot out lightning-quick, halting her abruptly. Adam pulled her to him with a biting grip on her neck.

"Where have you been, lovely whore?" His eyes were preternaturally bright.

She panted into his face.

Adam glowered and shook her cruelly. "I said, where have you been?"

When she still didn't answer, Adam slid his hand up her neck to her throat and squeezed. "Your life means nothing to me, Gypsy." His eyes were as icy as his voice.

Haltingly, Esmerelda told him everything, begging Adam to save the man she loved, to use his unnatural powers and restore his life.

So she knew his identity. He wasn't surprised. The Rom were well versed in the ancient ways. "If you know who I am, Gypsy whore, you know I don't give a damn about your wishes—or anyone else's, for that matter. And I certainly don't care about your pretty Hawk. In fact, the Hawk is the son of a bitch I came here to destroy."

Esmerelda paled.

"Come," he commanded. And she knew he didn't mean it the way he used to. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 20

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE DOESN'T WANT TO SEE ME? I want to see him, so let me in," Adrienne argued. "Unless, of course, he's given you orders that he specifically doesn't want *me* to come in the room," she added coolly. Hawk would never do that.

Grimm didn't budge.

"He wouldn't! You can't be serious. H-he..." She trailed off uncertainly. The Hawk wouldn't refuse. Well, he hadn't yet, but...

Obdurate Grimm, his eyes grave, blocked the door.

Adrienne peered at him intently. "Are you telling me that I have been forbidden to enter my husband's room?"

"I have my orders, milady."

"I'm his *wife*!"

"Well, maybe if you'd bloody acted like his wife before now he wouldn't be in there!" Grimm's eyes flashed angrily in his chiseled face.

"Oh!" Adrienne stepped back, startled by his fury.

"I did my friend a grievous wrong. I made a horrible wish that I would take back now with all my heart, if I only could. But I can't."

"*You're* the one who wished it!" Adrienne exclaimed.

Grimm continued, unwavering. "And had I known how terrible was the wish I made, how far-reaching and painful the consequences would be, I would have taken my own life first. I am no captain of the guard." He spat his disgust upon the cobbled stone. "I am no honorable friend. I am the lowest droppings from the foulest beast. I wished *you* upon my best friend, may the gods forgive me! And now he lies wounded by an arrow meant for you!"

Adrienne's eyes widened in her pale face. "I'm not so bad," she whispered.

"You, milady, are the iron maiden without a heart. You have brought him nothing but pain since you came here. In all my years with the Hawk, I have never seen such suffering in his eyes and I won't tolerate it even one more day. He would climb into the very heavens and pluck down the stars, one by one, to bestow upon your shining brow, and I tell him you are *not* worth it. You scoff at his romantic feelings, you shun his freely offered love, you scorn the man himself. Doona tell me you're not so bad, Adrienne de Simone. *You* are the worst thing that's ever happened to that man."

Adrienne bit her lip. Grimm had such a slanted view of things! What about all the unfair things the Hawk had done to her? She was the innocent one!

"He burned my queen! He stole my freedom, and he trapped me here."

"Because he cares for you and refuses to lose you! That's such a terrible thing? He used his own body to save your life. He placed himself like the truest shield before you and took the arrow meant for you. Well, I say better he had let it find your breast. 'Twould cease his torment and he wouldna be bleeding inside or out!"

"I didn't ask him to save me!" she protested.

"Just the point. You didn't *have* to ask him. He gave it freely. As he would give you everything. But you condemn him, though you know *nothing* of the mighty Hawk! Tell me, had you seen the arrow flying for him would you have sacrificed your life for his? I see from your eyes you would not. I'm sorry I wished for you and upon every star, every night for the rest of my worthless life, I'll be wishing to undo the wrong I've done. Now get out of my sight. The Hawk won't see you now. Perhaps not ever. And'tis good for him not to. Perhaps in time away from you he'll heal in more ways than one."

Adrienne raised her head proudly and met his blazing eyes. She refused to show the pain that closed around her heart. "Tell him I thank him for protecting me. Tell him I'll be back tomorrow and the next day and the next, until he sees me and allows me to thank him myself."

"I'll tell him no such thing," Grimm said flatly. "You're no good for him and I won't be stringing him along in your game."

"Then at least tell him I'm sorry," she said softly. And she meant it.

"You doona have enough human compassion to feel sorrow, lass. Heart of ice in a body of flame. You're the worst kind. You bring a man nothing but a brief sip of sweetness, then a keg full of bitter dregs."

Adrienne said nothing before she fled down the dim corridor.

* * * * *

"Where is she? Is she all right? Who's guarding her?" Hawk tossed restlessly in bed, kicking the coverlet off.

"She's fine, Hawk. Two guards are outside the Peacock Room. She's sleeping." Grimm fidgeted with the bottle of whisky the healer had left on the table, then poured a generous dollop into his glass. He moved abruptly to stand beside the hearth.

Hawk watched Grimm curiously. His loyal friend seemed unusually tense—probably blaming himself for not being there to prevent the attack, Hawk decided. He studied his bandaged hand carefully. "She didn't ask about me, Grimm?"

The silence grew until the Hawk reluctantly dragged his gaze from his hand to Grimm's rigid profile. When Grimm finally glanced up from the flames, the Hawk flinched at the sadness he read in every line of his best friend's face. "She didn't even ask if I was going to be all right? Where the arrow hit? Anything?" Hawk tried to keep his voice level but it broke harshly.

"I'm sorry." Grimm drained his glass and poked at the red-hot embers in the fireplace with the toe of his boot.

"Bloody hell, the lass is made of ice!"

"Rest, Hawk," Grimm spoke into the fire. "You've lost a lot of blood. You came too close to dying tonight. If you hadn't raised your hand in defense, the arrow would have taken out your heart rather than just pinning your hand to your chest."

Hawk shrugged. "A wee scratch on my chest—"

"Hell, a hole the size of a plum through the palm of your hand! The old healer had to pull the arrow *through* your hand to get it out. And you heard him yourself. Had it gotten lodged in your chest, which it should have but for uncanny luck, there would have been naught he could do to save you, cruelly notched as it was. You'll bear scars and pain in that hand for life."

Hawk sighed morosely. More scars and more pain. So what? She hadn't even bothered to see if he was alive. She could have at least pretended to be concerned. Visited briefly to maintain the pretense of civility. But no. She probably hoped he was dying, for with him out of the way she would be a very wealthy woman. Was she even now lying in the Peacock Room, counting her gold and her blessings?

"Not even one question, Grimm?" Hawk studied the silky hairs around the bandage that covered almost his entire hand.

"Not even one."

Hawk didn't ask again.

"Grimm, pack my satchel. Send half the guard and enough staff to ready the manor house in Uster. I leave at dawn. And quit poking at that blasted fire—it's too damned hot in here already."

Grimm dropped the poker to the stone hearth with a clatter. He turned stiffly from the fire and searched Hawk's face. "Are you going alone?"

"I just told you to ready half the guard."

"I meant, what about your wife?"

Hawk's gaze dropped back to his hand. He studied it for a moment, then glanced up at Grimm and said carefully, "I'm going alone. If she couldn't even be bothered to see if I lived or died, perhaps it's time I quit trying. At the very least, some distance may help me gain perspective."

Grimm nodded stiffly. "You're sure you can travel with that wound?"

"You know I heal quickly. I'll stop at the Rom camp and get some of the camomile and comfrey poultice they use—"

"But to ride?"

"I'll be fine, Grimm. Stop worrying. You're not responsible." Hawk didn't miss the bitter smile on Grimm's face. It comforted him somewhat to know that his friend was so loyal when his own wife couldn't be bothered to care if he was dead or alive. "You're a true friend, Grimm," Hawk said softly. He wasn't surprised when Grimm hurried from the room. In all the years he'd known him, words of praise had always made the man uncomfortable.

* * * * *

In the Peacock Room's massive bed, Adrienne tossed restlessly, maddeningly awake. At this moment she was quite certain she would never sleep again. Her mind would never find respite from the bitter, icy clarity that raged through her brain, recoloring her every action since she'd arrived at Dalkeith a vastly different hue.

* * * * *

Hawk and Grimm rode out as dawn rose over the lush fields of Dalkeith. Satisfaction surged through Hawk as he surveyed his home. With his years of service to the king finally at an end, he could at last see to the needs of his people and be the laird he was born to be. Now he wanted just one more thing—for Adrienne to truly be a wife to him in every sense of the word, to help govern Dalkeith by his side. More than anything he wanted to see their sons and daughters walk this land.

Hawk cursed himself for a hopeless romantic fool.

"The harvest will be rich this Samhain," Grimm remarked.

"Aye, that it will, Grimm. Adam." Hawk nodded curtly to the smithy, who was approaching, the field of gold parting for his dark form.

"You're leaving the game? You admit defeat, dread Hawk?" Adam gazed mockingly up.

"Don't goad the devil, smithy," Grimm warned tersely.

Adam laughed. "Bedevil the devil and devil be damned. I fear no devil and bow to no man. Besides, this concerns you not, or little at least—certainly not so much as you appear to think. You vastly overrate yourself, gruff Grimm." Adam

held the Hawk's gaze, smiling. "Fear not, I will care for her in your absence."

"I won't let him near her, Hawk," Grimm hastened to assure him.

"Yes you will, Grimm," Hawk said carefully. "If she *asks* for him you will let him near her. Under no other circumstances."

Adam nodded smugly. "And ask she will. Again and again in that husky, sweet morning voice she has. And Grimm, you might tell her for me that I have coffee from the Rom for her."

"You will not tell her that!" Hawk snapped.

"Are you trying to limit my contact?"

"I did not agree to provide you with a messenger! Yet—what will be will surely be. My guard stands for her, but it's you I will look to if she comes to harm."

"You give her into my keeping?"

"Nay, but I will hold you responsible if harm should befall her."

"I would never let harm come to any woman of mine—and she is mine now, fool Hawk."

"Only in as much as she wants to be so," the Hawk said softly. *And if she does, I will kill both of you with my bare hands and rest easier at night, dead inside.*

"You are either impossibly cocky or incredibly stupid, dread Hawk," the smithy said with scorn. "You will return to find the flawless Adrienne in my arms. Already, she spends most afternoons with me in your gardens—soon she will spend them in my bed," Adam taunted.

The Hawk's jaw clenched, his body tensed for violence.

"She didn't ask for you, Hawk," Grimm reminded tonelessly, shuffling from foot to foot.

"She didn't ask for him, captain of the guard?" Adam asked brightly. "Captain of honor, captain of truth?"

Grimm flinched as Adam's dark gaze searched his. "Aye," he said tightly.

"What a tangled web we weave..." Adam drawled slowly, the hint of a smile on his burnished face.

"What passes now between the two of you, Grimm?" Hawk asked.

"The smithy's a strange man," Grimm muttered.

"I would wish you Godspeed, but I believe God suffers little, if any, commerce with men such as us. So I wish you only a warrior's farewell. And never fear, I shall keep safe the lovely Adrienne," the smithy promised as he patted Hawk's stallion on the rump.

Shadows flickered behind the Hawk's eyes as he took his leave. "Watch her, Grimm. If there are any more attempts on her life, send word to me at Uster," he called over his shoulder as he rode away. His guards could keep her alive, in that he felt secure. But now there would be nothing to keep her from Adam.

As Grimm watched his best friend leave, Adam studied the stoic warrior. "She didn't ask for him?" he mocked softly.

"Who the hell are you, really?" Grimm snarled.

CHAPTER 21

"TRY A BIT MORE STEAMING WATER," LYDIA DECIDED, AND Tavis obliged.

They both peered into the pan. Lydia sighed. "Well, drat and blast it all!"

"Milady! Such language for a woman of your position, I'll say." Tavis rebuked.

"It certainly doesn't act like tea, does it, Tavis?"

"Nay, not a bit, I'll say, but still no reason for you to be unladylike about it."

Lydia snorted. "Only you, dear Tavis, dare criticize my manners."

"'Tis because you're usually the spit of perfection, so it fashes me more than a wee bit when you sally."

"Well, stir it, Tavis! Don't just let it sit there."

Tavis flashed her a disgruntled look as he began to stir the mixture rapidly.

"These talented hands were made for curing the richest hides in all of Scotia, not stirring a lady's drink, I'll say," he grumbled.

Lydia smiled at his words. How he went on about his talented hands! One would think they were made of purest gold instead of flesh, bone, and a few calluses. She glanced at him a pensive moment while he stirred the brew. Ever faithful Tavis by her side. Her mornings and afternoons wouldn't be quite so rich without the man. Her evenings, well, she'd spent her evenings alone for so many years that she scarcely noticed it anymore—or so she liked to believe.

"Why don't you marry?" she had asked Tavis twenty long years ago, when he'd still been a young man. But he had only smiled up at her as he'd knelt by the vats where he'd been soaking a deerskin to buttery softness.

"I have all I need here, Lydia." He spread his arms wide, as if he could sweep all of Dalkeith into his embrace. "Why would you be shooin' me on?"

"But don't you want children, Tavis MacTarvitt?" she probed. "Sons to take over your tannery? Daughters to cherish?"

He shrugged. "The Hawk is like a son to me. I couldn't ask for a finer braw lad, I'll say. And now we've the two wee ones running about, and well... you're without a husband again, Lady Lydia..." He trailed off slowly, his strong hands rubbing and squeezing the hide in the salt mixture.

"And just what does my being without a husband have to do with you?"

Tavis cocked his head and gave her the patient, tender smile that sometimes swam up to linger in her mind just before she drifted off to sleep at night.

"Just that I'll always be here for you, Lydia. You can always count on Tavis of the tannery, and I'll say that a thousand times more." His eyes were level and deep with some thing she was unable to face. She had already lost two husbands to two wars and the sweet saints knew there was always another war coming.

But Tavis MacTarvitt, he always came back. Scarred and bloody, he always came back.

Back to stand in the kitchens with her while she dried her herbs and spices. Back to lend a helping hand now and again as she dug in her rich black soil and pruned her roses.

There were times when they both knelt in the dirt, their heads close together, that she'd feel a fluttery sensation in her belly. And times when she sat by the hearth in the kitchen and asked his help brushing out her long dark hair. He'd take the pins out first, then unsmooth her plaits one by one.

"Nothing's happening Lydia." Tavis's voice shattered her pensive reverie and forced her mind back to the present.

She shook herself sharply, dragging her thoughts back to the task at hand. Coffee. She wanted coffee for her daughter-in-law.

"Maybe it's like the black beans or dried peas and has to soak overnight," she worried as she rubbed the back of her neck. Nothing was going right this morning.

Lydia had woken early, thinking about the lovely lass who had so bedazzled her son. Thinking about how the situation must seem from *her* point of view. Calamity after calamity had struck since her arrival.

Which is why she'd gone to the buttery to retrieve quite a store of the shining black beans her daughter-in-law so coveted. The least she could do was find Adrienne a cup of coffee this morning before she told her that the Hawk had left for Uster at dawn. Or worse, the news Tavis had discovered a scant hour ago: that Esmerelda had been trying to kill Adrienne but was now dead herself.

So it had come to this... peering into a pan full of glistening black beans that were doing not much of anything in the steaming water.

"Maybe we should smash the beans, Lydia," Tavis said, leaning closer. So close that his lips were scant inches from hers when he said, "What think you?"

Lydia beamed. "Tavis, I think you just might have it. Get that mortar and pestle and let's get at it. This morning I'd really like to be able to start her day off with coffee." *She's going to need it.*

* * * * *

"It's getting out of hand, fool. A mortal lies dead," King Finnbheara snapped.

"Of her own race's hand. Not mine," Adam clarified.

"But if *you* hadn't been here, it would not have come to be. You are perilously close to destroying everything. If the Compact is ever broken, it will be by my Queen's choosing, not through your act of idiocy."

"You had a hand in this plan too, my liege." Adam reminded. "Furthermore, I have harmed no mortal. I merely pointed out to the Rom that I was displeased. It was they who took action."

"You split hairs quite neatly, but you're too close to rupturing the peace we've kept for two millennia. This was not part of the game. The woman must go back to her time." King Finnbheara waved a dismissive hand.

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Adrienne was walking in the garden, thinking about the advantages of the sixteenth century and the serene bliss of unspoiled nature, when it happened. She suffered a horrid falling sensation, as if a great vortex had opened and a relentless whirlpool tugged her down. When she realized that she recognized the feeling, Adrienne opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. She'd felt this way just before she'd found herself on the Comyn's lap; as if her body were

being stretched thin and yanked at an impossible speed through a yawning blackness.

Agonizing pressure built in her head, she clutched it with both hands and prayed fervently, *Oh, dear God, not again, please not again!*

The stretching sensation intensified, the throb in her temples swelled to a crescendo of pain, and just when she was convinced she would be ripped in two, it stopped.

For a moment she couldn't focus her eyes; dim shapes of furniture wavered and rippled in shades of gray. Then the world swam into focus and she gasped.

Adrienne stared in shock at the fluttering curtains of her own bedroom.

She shook her head to clear it and groaned at the waves of pain such a small movement caused.

"Bedroom?" she mumbled dumbly. Adrienne looked around in complete confusion. There was Moonshadow perched delicately upon the overstuffed bed in her customary way, little paws folded demurely over the wood foot-rail, staring back at her with an equally shocked expression on her feline face. Her lime golden eyes were rounded in surprise.

"Princess!"

Adrienne reached.

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Adam quickly made a retrieving gesture with his hand and glared at his king. "She stays."

King Finnbheara snapped his fingers just as quickly. "And I said she goes!"

* * * * *

Adrienne blinked and shook her head, hard. Was she back in Dalkeith's gardens? No, she was in her bedroom again.

This time, determined to get her hands on Moonie, Adrienne lunged for her, startling the already confused cat. Moonie's back arched like a horseshoe, her tiny whiskers bristled with indignation, and she leapt off the bed and fled the

room on tiny winged paws.

Adrienne followed, hard on her heels. If by some quirk of fate she was to be given a second chance, she wanted one thing. To bring Moonshadow back to the sixteenth century with her.

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Adam snapped his fingers as well. "Do not think to change your mind midcourse. You agreed to this, my King. It wasn't just *my* idea."

* * * * *

Adrienne groaned. She was in the gardens again.

It happened three more times in quick succession and each time she tried desperately to capture Moonie. A part of her mind protested that this simply couldn't be happening, but another part acknowledged that if it was, she was damn well going to get her precious cat.

On the last toss, she almost had the bewildered little kitten cornered in the kitchen, when Marie, her erstwhile housekeeper, selected that precise moment to enter the room.

"Eees that you, Mees de Simone?" Marie gasped, clutching the doorjamb.

Startled, Adrienne turned toward her voice.

The women gaped at each other. A thousand questions and concerns tumbled through Adrienne's mind; how much time had passed? Was her housekeeper Marie living in the house now? Had she taken Moonie for her shots? But she didn't ask because she didn't know how much longer she had.

Sensing a reprieve, Moonshadow bolted for the door. Adrienne lunged after her, and abruptly found herself once again in the garden, shaking from head to toe.

Adrienne moaned aloud.

She'd almost had her! *Just one more time*, she whispered. *Send me back one more time.*

Nothing.

Adrienne sank to a stone bench to spare her shaky legs and took several deep breaths.

Of all the nasty things to have to endure first thing in the morning. This was worse than a bad hair day. This was insult to injury on a no-coffee day.

She sat motionless and waited again, hopefully.

Nothing. Still in the gardens.

She shivered. It had been terrible, being tossed about like that, but at least now she knew Moonie was okay and that Marie obviously hadn't waited *too* long before moving to the big house from her room over the garage. And although Adrienne's head still ached from being tossed back and forth, there was comfort in her knowledge that her Moonshadow was not a little skeleton cat traipsing through a lonely house.

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"I am your King. You will obey me, fool."

"I found the woman, therefore one might say I started this game, my liege. Allow me to finish it."

King Finnbheara hesitated, and Adam pounced on his indecision.

"My King, she rejects over and over again the man who pleased our Queen. She humiliates him."

The King pondered this a moment. *He claims a woman's soul*, his Queen had said dreamily. He had never seen such a look on Aoibheal's face in all their centuries together, unless he himself had put it there.

Fury simmered in the King's veins. He didn't want to withdraw from this game any more than Adam did—he'd watched and savored every moment of the Hawk's misery.

Finnbheara studied the fool intently. "Do you swear to honor the Compact?"

"Of course, my liege," Adam lied easily.

A mortal pleased my Queen, the King brooded. "She stays," he said decisively,

and vanished.



CHAPTER 22

"WELCOME, MILORD." RUSHKA'S GREETING SOUNDED PLEASANT enough, but Hawk felt a strange lack of warmth in it. Smudges of black marked the olive skin beneath the old man's tired eyes and they were pink-rimmed, either from sitting too close to a smoky fire or from weeping. And Hawk knew Rushka didn't weep.

Hawk stood in silence while the man ran a callused hand through his black hair. It was liberally streaked with gray and white, his craggy face handsome, yet equally marked by time. Absentmindedly, the man began to plait his long hair, staring into the dying embers as full morning broke across the valley.

Brahir Mount towered above this vale, its outline smoky blue and purple against the pale sky. Hawk dropped to a seat atop one of the large stones near the circle-fire and sat in silence, a trait that had endeared him to this tribe of Gypsies.

A woman appeared and deposited two steaming cups before leaving the two men to sit in companionable silence.

The old Gypsy sipped at his brew thoughtfully, and only when it was gone did he meet the Hawk's gaze again.

"You don't like our coffee?" he asked, noticing the Hawk had left his drink untouched.

Hawk blinked. "Coffee?" He peered into his cup. The liquid was rich, black and steaming. It smelled bitter but inviting. He took a sip. "It's good," he declared thoughtfully. With a hint of cinnamon, topped with clotted cream, the drink would be delicious. No wonder she liked it.

"A lass, is it?" The old man smiled faintly.

"You always did see right through me, Rushka, my friend."

"I hear you've taken a wife."

The Hawk looked piercingly at his old friend. "Why didn't you come, Rushka? When she was ill, I sent for you."

"We were told'twas Callabron. We have no cure for such a poison," the old man said. Rushka shifted his attention away from the Hawk's steady gaze.

"I would have thought you'd have come, if only to tell me that, Rushka."

The old man waved a hand dismissively. "Would have been a wasted trip. Besides, I was sure you had more pressing things to contend with. All aside, she was healed, and all's well that ends well, eh?"

The Hawk blinked. He'd never seen his friend behave so oddly. Usually Rushka was courteous and cheerful. But today there was a heaviness in the air so tangible that even breathing seemed a labor.

And Rushka wasn't talking. That in itself was an oddity.

Hawk sipped the coffee, his eyes lingering on a procession of people at the far end of the vale. If he wanted answers, he'd simply have to ask around his questions. "Why did you move out here, Rushka? You've camped in my north field by the rowans for years."

Rushka's gaze followed the Hawk's and a bitterness shadowed his brown eyes. "Did you come for Zeldie?" Rushka asked abruptly.

I can't handfast Zeldie, Hawk had told this man a decade ago when he'd been bound in service to his king. The Rom had desired a match and offered their most beautiful young woman. He'd explained that it simply wasn't possible for him to take a wife, and while Rushka had understood, Esmerelda hadn't. Zeldie, as they called her, had been so infuriated by his refusal that she'd quickly lain with man after man, shocking even her own liberal people. The Gypsies did not prize virginity—life was too short for abstinence of any sort, which was one of the reasons the people had seemed so intriguing to him as a young lad. He'd been ten when he'd secretly watched a dusky Gypsy girl with budding breasts and rosy nipples make love with a man. Two summers later she had come to him saying it was his turn. Ah, the things he'd learned from these people.

"Esmerelda and I have parted ways."

The old man nodded. "She said as much." Rushka spat into the dust at his feet. "Then she took up with *him*."

"Who?" Hawk asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"We do not speak the name. He is employed on your land with the working of metals."

"Who is he?" Hawk pressed.

"You know the man I mean."

"Yes, but who is he, really?"

Rushka rubbed his forehead with a weary hand.

Yes, Hawk realized with amazement, Rushka had definitely been weeping.

"There are situations in which even the Rom will not do commerce, no matter how much gold is promised for services. Esmerelda was not always so wise. My people apologize, milord," Rushka said softly.

Had the entire world gone mad? Hawk wondered as he drained the last of his coffee. Rushka was making no sense at all. Suddenly, his old friend rose and whirled about to watch the the stream of gypsies trailing down to the valley.

"What's going on, Rushka?" Hawk asked, eying the odd procession. It looked like some kind of Rom ritual, but if it was, it was one Hawk had never seen.

"Esmerelda is dead. She goes to the sea."

Hawk surged to his feet. "The sea! That's the death for a *bruhdskar*. For one who has betrayed her own!"

"And so she did."

"But she was your daughter, Rushka. How?"

The old man's shoulders rocked forward, and Hawk could see his pain in every line of his body. "She tried three times to kill your lady," he said finally.

Hawk was stunned. "Esmerelda?"

"Thrice. By dart and by crossbow. The bandage you wear on your hand is our doing. If you ban us from your lands, we will never again darken your fields. We

have betrayed your hospitality and made a mockery of your good will."

Esmerelda. It fit. Yet he could not hold the levelheaded, compassionate, and wise Rushka responsible for her actions. Nay, not him nor any of the Rom. "I would never seek to bar you from my lands; you may always come freely to Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea. Her shame is not yours, Rushka."

"Ah, but it is. She thought with your new bride gone you would be free to wed her. She was a strange one, though she was my daughter. There were times when even I wondered at the dark thing in her heart. But he brought her to us last night, and by the moon she confessed. We had no choice but to act with the honor we owed to all... parties... involved."

And now the procession to the sea, with every man, woman, and child carrying white rowan crosses, carved and bound and brilliantly emblazoned with blue runes. "What manner of crosses are those, Rushka?" Hawk asked. In all his time with these people he'd never seen the like before.

Rushka stiffened. "One of our rituals in this kind of death."

"Rushka—"

"I care for you like my own, Hawk," Rushka said sharply.

Hawk was stunned into silence. Rushka rarely spoke of his feelings.

"For years you have opened your home to my people. You have given with generosity, treated us with dignity and withheld censure, even though our ways are different from yours. You have celebrated with us and allowed us to be who we are." Rushka paused and smiled faintly. "You are a rare man, Hawk. For these reasons I must say this much, and the risk to my race be damned. Beware. The veil is thin and the time and place are too near here. Beware, for it would seem you are at the very core of it somehow. Take great care with those you love and no matter what you do, do not leave them alone for long. There is safety in numbers when this is upon us—"

"When what is upon us, Rushka? Be specific! How can I fight something I don't understand?"

"I can say no more, my friend. Just this: Until the feast of the Blessed Dead,

keep close and closer those you love. And far and farther those for whom you can't account.

Nay." Rushka raised a hand to stop the Hawk even as he opened his mouth to demand more complete answers. "If you care for my people, you will not visit us again until we celebrate the sacred Samhain. Oh," Rushka added as an afterthought, "the old woman said to tell you the black queen is not what she seems. Does this mean something to you?"

The only black queen that came to mind was now scattered ashes in the forge. Hawk shook his head. The old woman was their seer, and with her far-reaching vision she had inspired awe in Hawk as a young lad. "Nay. Did she say more?"

"Only that you'd be needing this." Rushka offered a packet bound with leather cord. "The camomile poultice you came for." He turned back to the procession. "I must go. I am to head the walk to the sea. Beware, and guard thee well, friend. I hope to see you and all your loved ones at the Samhain."

Hawk watched in silence as Rushka joined the funeral walk for his daughter.

When one of the Rom betrayed the rules by which they lived, he or she was disciplined by their own. It was a tight-knit community. Wild they could be, and liberal-minded about many things. But there were rules by which they lived, and those rules were never to be mocked.

Esmerelda had disregarded one of great importance—those who gave shelter to the Rom were not to be harmed in any manner. By trying to kill the Hawk's wife, she had attempted to harm the Laird of Dalkeith himself. But there was something else, the Hawk could sense it. Something Rushka wasn't telling him. Something else Esmerelda had done that had brought strife upon her people.

As Hawk watched the procession wind toward the sea, he whispered a Rom benediction for the daughter of his friend.

Easing himself back down by the fire, Hawk unwrapped the bandage and cleansed his wounded hand with Scotch and water. Carefully, he untied the leather pouch and wondered curiously at the assortment of stoppered flasks that fell out. He picked up the poultice and laid it to the side, sorting through the rest.

Just what had the seer seen? he wondered grimly. For she'd given him two other

potions, one of which he'd sworn to never use again.

Hawk snorted. One was an aphrodisiac he'd tried in his younger days. That one didn't worry him too much. The one he despised was the potion that had been created to keep a man in a prolonged but detached state of sexual arousal.

He turned the flask with the vile green liquid in it this way and that, watching the sun reflect off the faceted prisms of the stoppered bottle. Shadows rose up and taunted him openly for a time, until his obdurate will banished them back to hell. Quickly he spread the poultice, which eased the pain and would speed recovery. In a fortnight his hand would be well knit.

Adam. Although he hadn't outright said it, Rushka had insinuated that it was Adam who had brought Esmerelda to them last night. Which meant Adam knew Esmerelda had been trying to kill Adrienne.

What else did Adam know?

And just what had made his friend Rushka, who had never once shown terror in all the thirty-odd years Hawk had known him, betray visible fear now?

Too many questions and not enough answers. Every one pointed an accusing finger toward the smithy, who even now was probably trying to seduce Hawk's wife.

My wife who doesn't want me. My wife who wants Adam. My wife who didn't care enough to even ask about me when I was wounded.

Esmerelda was dead, but Rushka had made it clear that the real threat was still there, and close enough to Dalkeith to drive the Rom away. Apparently Adam was involved. And he'd left his wife in the thick of it. *Keep close and closer...*

The Hawk's mind whirled, sorting the scarce facts and hunting for the most feasible solution to his myriad problems. Suddenly the answer seemed impossibly clear. He snorted, unable to believe he hadn't thought of it before. But the lass had a way of getting so far under his skin that his mind didn't work in its usual logical fashion with her in the vicinity. No longer! It was time to take control, rather than allowing circumstances to continue to run amok.

His pact with Adam entailed that he could not forbid Adrienne to see the smithy.

But he could make it damned difficult for her to do so. He would take her to Uster with him. Far away from the mysterious, compelling Adam Black.

So what if she hadn't asked about him? She'd made it clear from day one that she didn't want to be wed to him. She had vowed to hate him forever, yet he would swear her body responded to his. He'd have her all to himself in Uster and be able to test that theory.

Just when had he become passive? *When you felt guilty for burning her queen*, his conscience reminded. *Trapping her here, in spite of her wishes, if she is indeed from the future.* But guilt was for losers and fools. Not for Sidheach Douglas. There was no guilt involved when she was at stake. "I love her," he told the wind. "And so I've become the greatest kind of fool."

A *nice* one.

Time to remedy that. Guilt and passivity dropped away from him in that clarifying instant. The Hawk who turned his steed around and headed for Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea to claim his wife was the true namesake of the Sidheach of yore, the Viking conqueror who had run ramshod over any who dared oppose him. *I commit, I attain, I prevail.*

He leapt to his mount and spurred his charger into a full run. *Seel and jess, my sweet falcon*, he promised with a dark smile.

* * * * *

Beneath a bough of rowans, Adam stiffened. Not fair! Not fair! Get thee hence! But fair or not, he'd seen true. The Hawk had turned around and was coming back to take Adrienne away with him. That was simply unacceptable. He obviously had to do something drastic.

* * * * *

"How could this be?" Lydia paced the kitchen, a flurry of claret-colored damask and concern.

"I don't have any idea, Lydia. One minute I was in the gardens and the next thing I knew I was in my bedroom back in my own time."

"Your own time," Lydia echoed softly.

Adrienne met her gaze levelly. "Almost five hundred years from now."

Lydia cocked her head and fell still, as if having a brisk internal debate with herself. The silence stretched into a protracted length of time while she pondered the limits of her beliefs. Lydia had always thought that women were more open-minded and adaptable than men when it came to inexplicable happenings. Perhaps it was because women experienced firsthand the incomprehensible and astonishing miracle of childbirth. To a woman who could create life inside her own body, why, time travel seemed like a minor miracle in comparison. But men... men were always trying to find a rational explanation for things.

When the Hawk had told her what strange news Grimm had discovered at Comyn keep, Lydia had studied Adrienne closely, watching for any signs of instability or peculiar behavior. Through her close observation, she had only become more convinced that Adrienne was just as sane as a person could be. She had concluded that while something had hurt Adrienne deeply in her past, whatever had hurt her had far from weakened her mind—Adrienne had been strengthened by it, like tempered steel. Oh, Lydia knew there was a very lonely young woman behind some of Adrienne's caustic humor and sometimes cool facade, but Lydia had found that stern walls most often guarded a treasure, and a treasure her daughter-in-law was indeed. Lydia cared for her enormously and had every intention of having grandchildren from her son and this lovely young woman.

The idea that the entire Comyn clan was suffering some strange madness didn't make sense. Lydia knew Althea Comyn well from time spent at court together, years past. She was a practical, worldly-wise woman, and although over the years Althea had grown more reclusive, she still remained pragmatic and levelheaded.

Lydia had long suspected the Laird Comyn of acts of twisted violence. Could she believe he had killed his own daughter in an act of senseless violence? Easily. He'd had his youngest son slaughtered like a lamb to the sacrifice for crossing clan lines and taking up with one of the Bruce's grandnieces.

Through all of the Red Comyn's acts of twisted and petty vengeance, Althea Comyn had managed the aftermath to the continued benefit of her clan. She was an extraordinary woman, holding her children and grandchildren together with sheer will and determination.

And so to Lydia, the thought of the pragmatic Lady Comyn suffering a fit of fantasy was more difficult to believe than the possibility of time travel. Simply put, Althea Comyn was too much a cold realist to indulge in any nonsense.

Having reached her conclusions, Lydia smiled gently at Adrienne, who had been waiting in tense silence. "Hawk told me what Lady Comyn said, Adrienne. That you're not her daughter. That you appeared out of thin air. Indeed, I have heard your brogue ebb and flow like a stormy, unpredictable tide."

Adrienne was momentarily chagrined. "You have?"

Lydia snorted. "When you were ill your burr disappeared entirely, my dear."

Adrienne blinked. "Why didn't anybody ever ask me about it?"

"In case you haven't noticed, things haven't been exactly calm since you've come to Dalkeith. Not a day has passed that hasn't brought new surprises. Murder attempts, unwelcome visitors, not to mention the Hawk behaving like a besotted lad. Besides, I hoped that one day you would confide in me of your own choosing. Now, the guards tell me they watched you disappear and reappear several times before their very eyes." Lydia rubbed her palms against the skirt of her dress, a far-off expression in her eyes. "From the future," she murmured softly. "My son believed it was some trauma that made you believe such madness and yet..."

"And yet what?" Adrienne urged.

Lydia met Adrienne's clear steady eyes. They stared at each other a long, searching moment.

Finally Lydia said, "Nay. Not a hint of madness in that gaze."

"I'm from another time, Lydia. I'm not mad."

"I believe you, Adrienne," Lydia said simply.

"You do?" Adrienne practically yelped. "Why?"

"Does it really matter? Suffice it to say, I am convinced. And when things finally return to normal around here, if they ever do, I want you to tell me all about it. Your time. I have many questions, but they will wait. For now, there are things

we must be clear on." Lydia's brow furrowed in thought. "How did you get here, Adrienne?"

"I don't know." Adrienne shrugged helplessly. "Truly, I have no idea."

"The Hawk thought it was the black queen. The Lady Comyn said it was bewitched."

"I thought it was too."

"So it never was the black queen... hmmm. Adrienne, we must be absolutely clear on this. Exactly what were you doing at the moment when it happened?"

"The first time, when I wound up at the Comyn keep? Or this time?"

"This time," Lydia said. "Although we should investigate the first time as well, and look for similarities."

"Well... I was walking in the gardens and I was thinking about the twentieth century. I was thinking about how much—

"You wanted to leave," Lydia finished for her, with a trace of bitterness.

Adrienne was equally surprised and touched. "No. Actually I was thinking about how nice it is here. In the 1990s, my God, Lydia, people were just out of control! Children killing parents. Parents killing children. Children killing children. They've all got cell phones stuck to their ears and yet I've never seen such distance between people trying so hard to be close. And just the day before I left you should have seen the headlines in the papers. A boy strangled a little girl when she wouldn't get off the phone and let him use it. Oh, I was thinking bitter thoughts of that time and comparing it to home and home was definitely winning."

"Say that again?" Lydia uttered softly.

"What?" Adrienne asked blankly. "Oh, headlines, papers, they're—" she started to explain, but Lydia cut her off.

"Home." Lydia's face lit with a beautiful smile. "You called this home."

Adrienne blinked. "I did?"

The two women looked at each other a long moment.

"Well, by the Sanhain, Lydia, give her the coffee, I'll say." Tavis's gruff voice came from the door. "Popping in and out like that, surely she's got a thirst on."

"Coffee?" Adrienne perked.

"Ah." Lydia smiled, pleased with herself and doubly delighted with her daughter-in-law who had called Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea home without even realizing it. She quickly filled a porcelain mug with the steaming brew and placed it proudly on the table in front of her.

Adrienne's nose twitched as her taste buds kicked up a sprightly jig and she reached greedily for the mug. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and drank.

And choked.

Tavis pounded her on the back and looked accusingly at Lydia. "I told you!" he said.

When Adrienne could breathe again, she wiped the tears from her eyes and peered suspiciously in her cup. "Oh, Lydia! You don't leave the coffee grounds—no, not grounds quite... more like a paste, I think. What did you do? Mush the beans and mix them with water? Ugh!"

"Didn't I tell you to run it through a sieve?" Tavis reminded. "Would you want to drink it like that?"

"Well, with all the hubbub I forgot!" Lydia snatched the mug. "Since you're so certain you know how to do it, you do it!" She thrust the mug at Tavis, sloshing thick brown stuff on the floor.

"Fine. See if I don't, I'll say!" With a supercilious look he made off for the buttery.

Lydia sighed. "Adrienne, I know it hasn't been a very good morning so far. I so wanted to have coffee for you, but in lieu of coffee, how about a cup of tea and a chat?"

"Uh-oh," Adrienne said. "I know that look, Lydia. What's wrong? Besides my being tossed through time portals?"

"Tea?" Lydia evaded.

"Talk," Adrienne said warily.

How best to start this? Lydia was determined to hide nothing from her. Lies and half-truths had a nasty way of reproducing and breeding distrust. If Adrienne could see the Hawk clearly, the truth would hopefully not do damage; but lies, somewhere down the line, assuredly would. "Esmerelda is dead."

"I'm so sorry," Adrienne offered instantly. "But who's Esmerelda?"

"The Hawk's... er... well, ex-mistress probably explains it the best—

"You mean in addition to Olivia? And where was he keeping *her*, by the way? In the dungeon? The tower? The room next to mine?"

Lydia winced. "It's not like that, Adrienne. He'd ended it with her months before you came. She lived with the Rom who camp on our fields in the warm seasons. According to what her people told Tavis this morning, she's the one who had been trying to kill you. The good news is, you're safe now."

"Haven't I been saying it all along? I told you it was probably one of *that man's* ex-girlfriends, didn't I? Oh!" She leapt to her feet.

"Adrienne."

"What now?"

Oh, bother, Lydia brooded. *Well buck up*, she told herself, knowing from the look on Adrienne's face that she was just spoiling for a good fight with the Hawk, and that she would be mad as a spitting banshee when she realized she couldn't get one. "Hawk left for Uster at dawn."

"For how long?" Adrienne gritted.

"He didn't say. Adrienne! Wait! We need to sort out what brought you here!" But Adrienne was no longer listening.

Lydia sighed as Adrienne stormed from the kitchen mumbling nonstop under her breath, "Arrogant pigheaded pain-in-the-ass Neanderthal..."

CHAPTER 23

JUST WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM, ADRIENNE DE SIMONE? She asked herself furiously.

She shrugged and sighed before forlornly advising a nearby rosebush, "I seem to have a bit of a thing for the man."

The rosebush nodded sagely in the soft summer breeze and Adrienne willingly poured the whole of it upon her rapt audience.

"I know he's been with a lot of women. But he's not like Eberhard. Of course, probably there's nobody like Eberhard except maybe a five-headed monster from the jaws of hell."

When the rosebush didn't accuse her of being melodramatic or waxing poetical, she summoned up a truly pitiful sigh and continued. "I can't understand a blasted thing about the man. First he wants me—I mean, come on, he burned my queen to keep me here, which didn't really work apparently, but the intention was there. He saves my life repeatedly even though it was kind of indirectly his fault it was in danger to begin with, and then he refuses to see me. And if that's not enough, he just up and leaves without so much as a fare-thee-well!"

Adrienne plucked irritably at the rosebush.

"I don't think he quite understands the full necessity of clear and timely communication. Timely meaning *now*. Where exactly *is* Uster, anyway?" She fully considered trying to find a horse and go there herself. How dare he just up and abandon her? Not that she minded entirely being where she was—Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea was certainly lovely, but what if she got zipped back to her own time for good and never saw him again?

Damned if that didn't put things in an entirely different perspective. A few soldiers of the war raging within her breast got up and traitorously switched camp on the heels of that thought.

How had she failed to realize that she could disappear and never see the man she was married to again? That she had no control over it whatsoever? Twenty more

soldiers marched over to the Hawk's side of the fracas raging inside her. Holy cow.

Don't you wonder, Adrienne, what it would feel like to lie down next to him in the sizzling heat of magnificent passion?

Okay. She had one soldier left on her side and his name was Mr. Suspicious N. Fearful.

Traitors! She frowned at the Hawk's new camp. Just thinking about him made her feel hot. She trailed her fingers in the fountain's sparkling, chemical-free water.

She couldn't imagine never seeing this beautiful fountain again, never smelling the lavender virgin air of 1513. No Lydia, no Tavis. No castle by the sea. No Laird Hawk, man of steel and blazing passion. Just Seattle and bitter memories and fear keeping her inside her house. The 1990s, bargain packaged with smog and ozone holes.

She doubted Hawk would ever try to send her on vacations alone. He seemed to be the kind of man who would treasure his wife and keep her close to his side if the woman allowed it. Close to that beautifully muscled side, and under that kilt...

"Dream a wicked dream," she sighed softly. Adrienne squeezed her eyes tightly shut and dropped her head in her hands. A long eternity of questions tumbled through her head, and slowly but surely Adrienne helped the last little soldier to his feet, dusted him off, and let him lean on her as she walked him over to the other side of the war. She had made her decision. She would try.

She raised her head from her hands slowly to meet Adam's piercing gaze. How long had he been standing there watching her with worship in his eyes. Dark eyes, black as hate. *Now where had that come from?*

"You hate the Hawk, don't you, Adam?" she asked in a flash of crystal-clear intuition.

He smiled appreciatively. "You women are like that. Cut to the quick of it with a canny eye. But hate attaches a great deal of importance to its predicate," he mocked as he dropped himself beside her on the ledge.

"Don't play word games with me, Adam. Answer my question."

"This would please you? Honesty from a man?"

"Yes."

He shrugged a beautiful, sun-kissed shoulder. "I hate the Hawk."

"Why?" Adrienne asked indignantly.

"He's a fool. He fails to cede appropriate due to your beauty, Beauty."

"To my *what*?" The *least* important thing about her.

The smithy flashed a blinding smile. "He seeks but to spread them, to slip between your thighs, but those love-slick dewy petals *I* would immortalize."

Adrienne stiffened. "That's very poetic, but there's no need to be rude, Adam. And you don't even know me."

"I can think of nothing I'd rather do with my time than spend it knowing you. In the biblical sense, since you find my other references too graphic. Is that pretty enough for you?"

"Who are you?"

"I can be anyone you want me to be."

"But who are *you*!" she repeated stubbornly.

"I am the man you've needed all your life. I can give you whatever you wish before you even realize you're wishing for it. I can fill your every longing, heal your every wound, right your every wrong. You have enemies? Not with me at your side. You have hunger? I will find the most succulent, ripe morsel and feed you with my bare hands. You have pain? I will ease it. Bad dreams? I will chase them a sunder. Regrets? I will go back and undo them. Command me, Beauty, and I am yours."

Adrienne shot him a withering look. "The only regrets I have are all centered around beautiful men. So I suggest you get yourself out of my—"

"You find me beautiful?"

Something about this man's eyes was just not quite right. "Aesthetically speaking," she clarified.

"As beautiful as the Hawk?"

Adrienne paused. She could be cutting at times, but when push came to shove it was her nature to go out of her way not to hurt people's feelings. Adrienne preferred to maintain her silence when her opinion was not the answer sought, and in this case, her silence was answer enough.

Adam's jaw tightened.

"As beautiful as the Hawk?"

"Men are different. You can't compare apples to oranges."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to compare a man to a man. The Hawk and myself," he growled.

"Adam, I am not getting into this with you. You're trying to force me to say something—"

"I am only requesting a fair answer."

"Why is this so important to you? Why do you even care?"

His mood changed, quicksilver. "Give me a chance, Beauty. You said aesthetically I please. You can't truly compare men until you've tasted the pleasure they can give you. Lie with me Beauty. Let me—"

"Stop it!"

"When you watched me forge the metal it made you burn." Adam's intense black eyes bored into hers, penetrating and deep. He claimed her hand and turned it palm up to his lips.

"Yes, but that was before I saw—" She broke off quickly.

"The Hawk," Adam spit out bitterly. "Hawk the magnificent. Hawk the living legend. Hawk the seductive bastard. Hawk—the king's whore. Remember?"

She gazed sadly at him. "Stop it, Adam," she finally said.

"Have you bedded him?"

"That's none of your business! And let go of my hand!" She tried to tug her hand out of his grasp, but his grip tightened and as his fingers caressed her wrist she felt confusion assail her senses.

"Answer me, Beauty. Have you lain with the Hawk?"

She swallowed tightly. *I won't answer him*, she vowed stubbornly even as her lips murmured, "No."

"Then the game still plays, Beauty and I have yet to win. Forget the Hawk. Think of Adam," he crooned as he claimed her lips in a brutal kiss.

Adrienne seemed to sink deeper and deeper into a murky sea that made her want to curl up and pull into herself.

"Adam. Say it, Beauty. Cry for me."

Where was the Hawk when she needed him? "H-h-hawk," she whispered against Adam's punishing mouth.

Enraged, Adam forced her head back until she met his furious gaze. As Adrienne watched, Adam's dark features seemed to shimmer strangely, changing... but that wasn't possible, she assured herself. Adam's dark eyes suddenly seemed to have the Hawk's flecks of gold, Adam's lower lip suddenly curved in Hawk's sensual invitation.

"Is this what I must do to have you, Beauty?" Adam asked bitterly.

Adrienne stared in horrified fascination. Adam's face was melting and redefining, and he looked more like her husband with every passing instant.

"Must I resort to such artifice? Is it the only way you'll have me?"

Adrienne extended a shaking hand to touch his oddly morphing face. "A-adam, s-stop it!"

"Does this make you burn, Beauty? If I wear his face, his hands? For I will, if it does!"

You're dreaming, she told herself. You've fallen asleep, and you're having a really, really bad nightmare, but it will pass.

Adam's hands were on her breasts and fingers of icy fire shivered a column of exquisite sensation through her spine... but it was not pleasure.

* * * * *

A dozen paces away the Hawk froze, mid-step, after barreling up the long bridge to the gardens. Line by line, muscle by muscle, his face became a mask of fury and pain.

How long had he been gone? A dozen hours? Half a day?

The wound he'd taken while saving her life burned angrily in his hand as his desire for her throbbed angrily beneath his kilt.

He forced himself to watch a long moment, to seal permanently upon his mind just what kind of fool he was to want this lass. To love her even as she betrayed him.

The smithy's hard, bronzed body stretched the length of his wife's sultry curves as they lounged on the fountain's edge. His hands were twined in her silvery-blond mane and his mouth was locked on his wife's yielding lips.

Hawk watched as she whimpered, hands frantic against the smithy in her need... as she pulled at his hair, frantically clawed at his shoulders.

Grass and flowers ripped from the fragrant earth beneath his boot as Hawk turned away.

* * * * *

Adrienne struggled for her sanity. "Go... back t-to whatever hell... from whence y-you c-c-came..." The words took every ounce of energy she still possessed and left her gasping limply for air.

The groping hands abruptly released her.

She fell off the ledge and landed in the fountain with a splash.

The cool water swept away the thick confusion instantly. She cringed in terror, waiting for the smithy's hand to reach in for her, but nothing happened.

"A-Adam?"

A breath of puckish wind teased her chilled nipples through the thin material of her gown. "Oh!" she covered them hastily with her palms.

"A-Adam?" She called, a little stronger. No answer.

"Who are you, really?" she yelled furiously into the empty morning.



CHAPTER 24

IN HER DEPRESSION, ADRIENNE CONSIDERED NOT EATING. SHE wondered if they had cigarettes in 1513, reconsidered, and decided to eat instead.

Until she found the Scotch.

About time, she mused as she sat in his study and propped her feet on his desk. She poured a healthy dollop of the whisky into a cut-crystal tumbler and took a burning swallow. "Och," she said to the desk thoughtfully, "but they do brew a fine blend, doona they?"

She spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in his sacred haven, hiding from the strange smithy's advances, Lydia's abiding concern, and her own heartache. She read his books as she watched the misty rain that started while she drained the tumbler of Scotch. He had fine taste in books, she thought. She could fall in love with a man who liked to read.

Later, when she rummaged through his desk, she told herself she had every right because she *was* his wife, after all. Letters to friends, from friends, to his mother while he'd been away sat neatly ribboned in a box.

Adrienne picked through the drawers, finding miniatures of the Hawk's sister and brother. She discovered boyhood treasures that warmed her heart: a leather ball with often-repaired stitching, cunningly carved statues of animals, rocks and trinkets.

By her second glass of Scotch she was liking him entirely too much. *Enough Scotch, Adrienne, and it's long past time to eat something.*

On unsteady legs she'd made her way to the Greathall.

* * * * *

"Wife." The voice held no warmth.

Adrienne flinched and gasped. She spun around and found herself face-to-face with the Hawk. But he'd gone to Uster, hadn't he? Apparently not. Her heart soared. She was ready to try, but something in his gaze unnerved her and she

hadn't the foggiest notion why. She narrowed her eyes and peered at him intently. "You look downright cantankerous," she said. She emitted a squeak of fear when he lunged for her. "Wh-what are you doing, Hawk?"

His hands closed about her wrists with steely possession as he used his powerful body to force her back against the cool stone of the corridor.

"Hawk, what—"

"Silence, lass."

Wide-eyed, she stared into his face, searching for some clue that would explain the icy hostility in his eyes.

He forced his muscular leg between her thighs, cruelly pushing them apart. "You've been drinking, lass."

His breath was warm on her face, she could smell the potent stench of alcohol. "So? So have you! And I thought you were in Uster!"

His beautiful lips contorted in a bitter smile. "Aye, I'm quite aware that you thought I was in Uster, wife." His brogue rasped thickly, betraying the extent of his rage.

"Well, I don't see why you're so angry with me! *You're* the one who's had nine million mistresses, and *you're* the one who left without saying goodbye, and *you're* the one who wouldn't—"

"What's good for the gander is not necessarily good for the goose," he snarled. He twined his hand in her hair and yanked her back sharply, baring the pale arch of her throat. "Neither in spirit consumption nor in lovers, wife."

"What?" He wasn't making any sense, talking about farm animals when she was trying to have a reasonably sober conversation with him. She gasped when he bit her gently at the base of her neck where her pulse pounded erratically. If she couldn't handle this man sober, she certainly couldn't handle him tipsy.

With excruciating leisure, he traced his tongue down her neck and across the upper curves of her breasts. Her mouth went dry and an entire flock of twittering birds took wing in her belly.

"You wanton," he breathed against her flawless skin.

Adrienne moaned softly, partly in pain from his words and partly in pleasure from his touch.

"Faithless, cruel beauty, what did I do to deserve this?"

"What did *I* do—"

"No!" he thundered. "No words. I will suffer no honeyed lies from that sweet snake's lair you call a mouth. Aye, lass, you have the most cruel of poisons. Better I had let the dart take you, or the arrow. I was a fool to suffer one moment of pain on your account."

I'm dreaming again? she wondered. But she knew she wasn't because never in a dream had she been so aware of every inch of her own body, her traitorous body that begged to get closer to this angry man who dripped sex appeal, even in his fury.

"Tell me what he has to give you that I don't have! Tell me what you hunger for in that man. And after I've shown you every inch of what I have to give you, then you can tell me if you still think he has more than I."

"The smithy?" she asked incredulously.

He ignored her question completely. "I should have done this long ago. You are *my* wife. You will share *my* bed. You will bear *my* children. And most assuredly, by the time I'm done with you, you will never say that word again. I told you the Hawk's rules once. Now I'm reminding you for the last time. *Smithy* and *Adam* are two words that you will never say to me. If you do, I will punish you so innovatively and cruelly that you'll wish you'd never been born."

The words were spoken with such white-hot yet carefully controlled anger that Adrienne didn't even begin to question what punishment he might have in mind. She knew instinctively that she never wanted to find out. As she parted her lips to speak, Hawk rubbed his body against hers, intimately pressing his hard cock between her thighs. The words she'd planned to say were exhaled instead as a soft *whoosh* of air that tapered into a husky moan. Adrienne wanted to melt against him, to arch herself into his body with complete abandon. She couldn't even stand next to this man without wanting him.

His smile was mocking and cruel. "Does he feel like this, lass? Does he have this much to pleasure you with?"

No man has that, she thought feverishly, as her hips moved hungrily against him. Hawk growled softly, closing his mouth over hers in a ruthless, punishing kiss.

Adrienne felt his hand, raising her skirt and realized that in his current rage the Hawk was going to take her, right here in the dim and chill hallway. Topsy or not, this was not how Adrienne planned to part with her hard-kept virginity. She wanted him, but not like this. Never like this. "Stop! Hawk, whatever you think I've done—I haven't!" she cried.

He silenced her with his mouth, his kiss hot, hungry, and cruel. She understood he was punishing her with his body, not making love to her, but she couldn't resist his tongue and couldn't prevent herself from breathlessly kissing him back.

Hawk dropped his head and grazed her neck with his teeth, then teased her hardened nipples through her gown. Adrienne was so lost in pleasure that she didn't realize what he was doing until it was too late.

She felt the rasp of a rope against her wrists as he yanked her arms down and spun her around, securing her hands at the base of her back.

"You son of a bitch!" she hissed.

"Son of a bitch," he repeated thoughtfully. "Now you don't like my mother?"

"I don't like *you* when you're like this! Hawk! Why are you doing this? What have I done?"

"Silence, lass," he commanded softly, and she learned then that when his voice was soft and supple as oiled leather was when she was in the most extreme danger. It was the first of many lessons he would teach her. When the silken hood slid down over her face she screamed her fury and lashed out against him with her feet. Struggling, kicking, raging in his arms, she cursed raggedly.

"Wife," he said right against her ear through the silk hood, "you belong to me. Soon you will not remember that there was ever a time when you didn't."

* * * * *

Adam stood amidst the shadow of the rowans and watched as the Hawk stalked through the night, the hooded woman fighting his grasp. So he thought he could escape Adam Black, did he? Hawk thought he could take her away? Clever. Adam hadn't negotiated that point. Hawk had obviously decided to play cutting-edge close to the letter of their law.

The man was becoming downright infuriating.

No, this was not what Adam had expected at all when he'd staged his scene in the gardens.

So, the man was more brute than he had thought. He had vastly underestimated his opponent. He'd thought the Hawk was too decent and too *nice* to know when a man had to be as hard and unforgiving as steel with a woman. He'd counted on the noble Hawk being so wounded by seeing her with the smithy that he'd curse her and swear her off, maybe divorce her—any of which, according to his plan, would send her scurrying to his blazing forge at the rowans. He'd thought, quite mistakenly it seemed, that the Hawk had at least one or two weaknesses of character.

"Silence, wife!" The Hawk's baritone resonated in the darkness. Adam shuddered. No mortal should have such a voice.

Well, this just wouldn't do. He'd have to seriously intervene, because if such a man carried off a woman and kept her for a time, the woman would surely belong to him when he was through.

And Adam never lost at anything. Certainly not this.

He stepped forward from the shadows, prepared to confront the Hawk, when he heard a harsh whisper behind him.

"Fool!"

"What now?" Adam snarled, turning to face King Finnbheara.

"The Queen demands your presence."

"Now?"

"Right now. She's on to us. I think it's that snoopy little Aine again. You'll have

to leave this game at least long enough to allay the Queen's suspicions. Come."

"I can't come *now*."

"You have no choice. She will come for you herself if you don't. And then we'll have no chance left at all."

Adam stood still a long moment, allowing his rage to burn through him and leave cinders of resolve in its wake. He had to be very careful where his Queen was concerned. It would do him no good to bar her whim or will in any manner.

He allowed himself one long look over his shoulder at the retreating figure on horseback. "Very well, my liege. Through this rotten hell, bar my will, pledged to none but *the fairest* queen, lead on."



CHAPTER 25

SHE STOPPED SCREAMING ONLY WHEN HER VOICE GAVE OUT. *Stupid*, she told herself. *What did that accomplish? Not a thing. You're trussed up like a chicken about to be plucked and now you can't even peep a protest.*

"Just take the hood off, Hawk," she begged in a gravelly whisper. "Please?"

"Rule number nine. My name from this moment forward is Sidheach. *Sidheach*, not Hawk. When you use it, you will be rewarded. When you don't, I will permit no quarter."

"Why do you want me to use that name?"

"So I know you understand who I really am. Not the legendary Hawk. The man. Sidheach James Lyon Douglas. Your husband."

"Who first called you Hawk?" she asked hoarsely.

He stifled a swift oath and she felt his fingers at her throat. "Who first called me Hawk doesn't make the difference. Everyone did. But'twas all the king ever called me." he gritted. He didn't add that in all his life he had never given a lass leave to call him Sidheach. Not one.

He untied the hood and lifted it from her face, then poured cool water into her mouth, relieving some of the burning that made her voice so rough. "Try not to scream anymore tonight, lass. Your throat will bleed."

"King James used only that name?" she asked swiftly.

Another sigh. "Yes."

"Why?"

She could feel his body tense behind her. "Because he said I was his own captive hawk, and it was true. He controlled me for fifteen years as surely as a falconer controls his bird."

"My God, what did he *do* to you?" she whispered, horrified at the icy depths in his voice when he spoke of his service. The Hawk controlled by another?

Incomprehensible. But if the threat of destruction of Dalkeith, his mother, and his siblings had been held over his head? The threat of killing the hundreds of his clanspeople? What would the noble Hawk have done to prevent that?

The answer came easily. Her strong, wise, ethical husband would have done whatever he had to do. Any other man the Hawk would have simply killed. But one couldn't kill the King of Scotland. Not without having his clan's existence completely eradicated by the king's army. Same result, no choice. A sentence of fifteen years, all because of a scorned and spoiled king.

"Can't you just accept me as I am now, lass? It's over. I'm free." His voice was so low and resonant with anguish that she froze. His words threw her off balance; it was something she might have said herself if confronted with her past by someone she cared for. Her husband understood pain, and perhaps shame and, oh so surely, regret. What right had she to judge and condemn a person for a dark past? If she were honest with herself, she would even point out that her past had been the result of her own naive mistakes, where his painful ordeal had been one he'd been forced to endure to keep safe his clan and his family.

She wanted to touch and heal the man who sat so stiffly away from her now, yet she was not quite sure how to begin. This much was clear—he hadn't been the king's whore, whatever that was, because he'd wanted to; that fact went a long way toward easing her mind. More than anything, she wanted to understand this fierce, proud man. To brush away the shadows in his beautiful dark eyes. She jerked swiftly when she felt silk graze her jaw.

"No! Don't put the hood back on me. Please."

Hawk ignored her protests, and she sighed as he retied the cords.

"Will you just tell me why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you seeling' me now?" What had she done to provoke his anger?

"I stepped back, lass. I gave you what no other man would have given you. I allowed you the time to choose me of your own will. But it seems your will is wildly foolish and needs persuading. Choose me, you will. And when you do, there will be no other man's name on your lips, no other man's shaft between

your thighs, no other man's face in your mind's eye."

"But—" She wanted to know why her time had so suddenly run out. What had made him snap?

"No buts. No more words, lass, unless you would have me bind your mouth as well. From this time forward you see without the benefit of those beautiful, lying eyes. Perhaps

I'm not a complete fool. Perhaps you might see true with your inner vision. Then again, perhaps not. But your first lesson is that what I look like has nothing to do with who I am. Who I might have had to be in the past has nothing to do with who I am. When you finally see me clearly, then and only then will you see with your eyes again."

* * * * *

They arrived in Uster shortly after dawn. Pushing his horse hard through the night, Hawk turned a two-day journey into less than one.

He guided her into the laird's residence, past the gawking staff, up the stairs and to the bedroom. Without a word, he cut the bonds on her wrists with a dagger, pushed her to the bed, locking the door behind him as he left.

* * * * *

The instant Adrienne's hands were free she ripped off the silken hood. She'd been prepared to shred it into tiny silken tatters but realized he'd probably just use something else if she destroyed it. Besides, she mused, she had no intention of fighting him. She had enough of a battle on her hands trying to face her own emotions; let him do what he felt he needed to do. It granted her more time to grow familiar with the new feelings inside her. Dear heaven, but he was angry with her. Just what he was angry about she wasn't certain, but her resolve was still true. In the face of his fury, her soldiers had not changed their minds. They all stood proudly on the Hawk's side, and she was with them to a man.

He planned to seduce her callously? To open her inner vision to him?

He didn't need to know that it had already been opened, and that she shamelessly anticipated every moment of the seducing.

* * * * *

The Hawk walked slowly through the streets of Uster. It was nearly deserted at this late hour, only those of courage, abject stupidity, or evil intent walked the streets late at night when a heavy fog was roiling in. He wondered into which category he fell.

Much had been begun this day, yet even more remained unfinished. He'd spent most of his morning going over the miller's books and talking with angry villagers who accused the man of substituting their grain. There was only one miller, so positioned by the king's men before Hawk had been released from his pledge of service. Being the only one, he had been able to exert absolute control over the villager's grain and had, in collusion with the local bailiff, indeed been cheating on weights, substituting moldy meal for better grains, and turning a tidy profit three towns northerly.

Hawk sighed. That had been only the first of a dozen problems demanding his attention. He would have to hold the courts for a fortnight to catch up on all that had gone wrong under his benign neglect while he had been off in service to James.

But he had time to remedy the villagers' many ills, and remedy them he would. His people had been well pleased to have him back and once again taking an interest in their needs. As of this day, three men in Uster now held miller's tools and miller's rights. The Hawk smiled. Competition would be good for his people.

Tansy and mint swirled out the door of an open establishment as he passed by. A woman beckoned from the doorway, clad only in a filmy bit of stained and tattered silk. The Hawk cocked an amused brow and smiled, but declined as he continued down the street. His eyes turned dark and bitter. He had more than he could handle waiting for him at home.

* * * * *

Adrienne sat up with a start when she heard the Hawk throw open the door to her chamber. She had been imagining the sweet seduction he had in store for her and had to use all her composure to hide her excitement at his return.

"Oh, you're back," she drawled, hoping she had succeeded in masking her delight.

He crossed the room in two awesome strides, took her in his arms, and frowned

darkly down at her. He lowered his head inexorably toward her lips, and she turned her face away. Undeterred, he grazed her neck with his teeth until he reached the base where her traitorous pulse beat raggedly. Her breath caught in her throat as he nipped her and ran his tongue up the column of her neck. If his very nearness made her shiver, his kisses would be her complete undoing. His rough shadow beard chafed her skin when he tugged her head back and gently nipped the lobe of her ear. Adrienne sighed her pleasure, then added a little squeal of protest just to be convincing.

"You will forget the smithy, lass," he promised. A swift yank of her hair forced her to meet his gaze.

"I had no intention of remembering him anyway. He's nothing more than a pushy, overbearing, liberty-taking scoundrel."

"Nice try, wife," Hawk said dryly.

"What do you mean, nice try? Why are you so obsessed with the smithy?"

"*Me?* You're the one who's obsessed with the smithy!" He raised the hood toward her head.

"You are so thickheaded you don't even see the truth when it's right in front of you."

"Oh, but that's just the point, lass. I saw the truth clearly with my own eyes that day in the garden. Aye, too clearly, and the memory of it seethes in my mind, mocking me. I had just been wounded saving your fickle life, but you had no care for that. Nay, you had other sweet plans in the making. And my absence only made it easier for you. Gone from your side for all of a few hours and so quickly you lay beneath him on the fountain. *My fountain. My wife.*"

So that was it, she mused. He'd returned and seen the smithy when he'd been doing those foggy frightening things to her, when she'd been fighting him. He'd been standing there watching the smithy practically rape her and, in his mind, believed she was willing. He hadn't even thought to help her.

"Perhaps I'm not the only one who can't see so clearly," she said scathingly.

"Perhaps there are two in this room who could benefit from a little inner vision."

"What say you, lass?" Hawk said softly.

She would not dignify his stupidity with a response. A man had practically raped her, and in his jealousy her husband had simply watched. The more she protested her innocence, the guiltier she would look. And the more she thought about it, the angrier it made her. "I merely suggest you find that inner eye yourself, husband," she said, just as softly.

Her quiet dignity gave him pause. No mewling or lying or groveling. No justifications. Could it be he had misunderstood what he had seen on the fountain? Perhaps. But he would erase her memories of the smithy, that he vowed.

He smiled darkly and seeled her with the silken hood again. Yes, by the time he was finished she would forget Adam Black even existed.

That he knew he could do. He'd been trained for it. First by the Gypsies and then by the Duchess of Courtland. "Sex is not merely a momentary pleasure," she'd instructed him. "It is an art to be practiced with studied hand and discriminating taste. I am going to school you in this, the finest of forays into human scandal. You will be the best lover the land has ever known by the time I am done. Easily, for there is no question that you are the most beautiful."

And the lessons had begun. She'd been right—there had indeed been much he hadn't known. And she showed him, this spot here, that curve there, this way of moving, a thousand positions, the subtle ways to use his body to bring many different kinds of pleasure, and finally, all the mind games that went with it.

He learned well, committing this art to memory. And in time, his eager boyish hunger was lost adrift a meaningless sea of conquests and mistresses.

Oh, he was the best, no question about it. He left the lasses begging for his attention. The legend of the Hawk grew. Then one day, a woman whom Hawk had spurned repeatedly—Olivia Dumont—petitioned King James for his favors as if he were a piece of property to be granted.

And like royal property, James had granted him, wielding the same threat of harm to Dalkeith should he disobey.

How James had loved that—especially when he realized how much the Hawk

had been humiliated by it. And so the king had said, *you will be whoever We want you to be, even if it's a thing so trivial as Our whore, to please Our favored ladies*. Other men were sent to battle. The Hawk was sent to bed with Olivia. Doubly humiliating.

Many men had envied the Hawk—the lover of so many beautiful women. Still more men had hated the Hawk for his prowess and virility, and for the legends the ladies wove about him.

Eventually, James had grown tired of hearing the legends. Sick of his ladies clamoring about the beautiful man, James had sent the Hawk abroad on absurd and risky missions. To steal a crown jewel from Persia. To beguile a priceless objet d'art from an old heiress in Rome. Whatever odd treasure the greedy James had heard of, the Hawk was sent to acquire by fair means or foul. The king's whore had been simply that: a man who did the king's "dirty work," whatsoever his fickle liege wished at the time.

Now his eyes returned to the lass standing in silence before him.

She was so different from any he'd ever known. From the first day he'd seen her, he'd recognized that she was truly without artifice or coy subterfuge. Although she might have hidden depths, they were neither malicious nor self-serving but had been born of suffering and loneliness, not of deceit. He'd recognized that she had a pure heart, as pure and real and full of possibility as his Gypsy fields had been, and that it had already been given to a man who was undeserving! To the epitome of deceit and strange artifice. To Adam Black.

By hook or crook or whatever fashion was necessary, he would woo and win her. He would make her see the error of her ways—that she'd given her heart to the wrong man.

She was seeled both from him and to him, until she learned to see again with that pure heart which had recoiled into hiding. He would wake it, shake it up, and force it to come out and face the world again. And when she'd learned to see him for what he really was, then she could see him with her eyes again.

Adrienne stood stock-still and uncertain. It was strange, knowing he was in the room but not knowing where or what he was doing. He could be standing in front of her even now, his body nude and glistening in the oil lights. She

imagined him lit by the soft glow of candles. She loved the fires and torches of this century. What kind of romance could live and breathe beneath fluorescent lights of her own time?

She regretted the hood as it deprived her of seeing him, but decided that was for the best. If she could see him, that meant he could see her eyes, and they would surely betray her fascination, if not her willingness.

She felt the whisper of a breeze. Was he to her left? No, her right.

"The first time is for erasing all your memories of another man."

He was circling round her. Her heart thundered. With any other man, being unable to see would have felt threatening, but not with the Hawk. For despite his fury, he had proven himself to be honorable to the core. She knew that although he'd seeled her, he had done so in an attempt to win her love and trust—not to dominate or subdue her. There was nothing threatening in the fact that he'd closed her eyes to him; he'd opened her heart with his silken hood. Her lack of vision heightened all her other senses to an exquisite state.

When his hand caressed the column of her neck, she swallowed a sigh of pleasure.

Hawk continued circling her; to her side, then to her back, and, in what seemed like an eternity later, around to her front. Her ears strained for clues, her body vibrated with tension, wondering, waiting.

"The second time will be for teaching. Teaching you how it feels to be loved by a man such as me. 'Tis a thing you'll never forget."

His breath fanned the nape of her neck, his fingers picked up a fall of her hair. She could hear only ragged breathing—his or hers, she wasn't certain. She stiffened at the brush of his hand against the curve of her hip, feeling a wild jolt of electricity charge through her body.

"The third time will be for the jessing and leashing. I promise you that time will be the end of your resistance."

He trailed his fingers down her neck, across her breasts from nipple to nipple, then down over her taut stomach. His light caress feathered between her legs and

was gone, leaving behind an aching hunger.

"But the fourth time, ah, the fourth time when I hear your sweet cries, that one's for me, lass. For the waiting and the hunger and the agony of wanting you. Just for me."

His hands were on her shoulders, sliding the silk of the gown over her skin. Undoing tiny pearl buttons at the nape of her neck one by one with something that felt like... teeth? Oh! His tongue flickered against the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck then moved lower still.

Oh dear heavens but this sensuous stroke of his tongue could be her complete undoing. The rough velvet of his tongue traced its way all the way down her spine, then lower still. She trembled.

Her knees weak, she swayed in silence. Can't make a sound, she reminded herself. Not a good sound, anyway. Only protests.

Just when she was certain she couldn't maintain her silence a second longer, he stepped back, and she felt a slow breeze in his wake. She turned, attempting to track him in the silence.

The back of her gown was open, her skin damp from his kisses. She waited in mute anticipation. *Where was he?*

There, she thought as she suddenly felt him grasp the fabric of her dress. He tugged her gown and it fell to the floor in a rustle of silk. The chemise fell next, and then there was nothing but stockings, lace stays, and slippers.

Hawk was grateful she was seeled, that she couldn't see the tremor in his hands as he slid to his knees and removed one stocking slowly, rolling it down inch by inch as he knelt before her. He trailed reverent kisses down her long, silky leg. From her supple thigh to the back of her knee to her trim ankle, he lavished her legs, first one, then the other, with hot kisses, making certain he didn't miss one delectable inch of the creamy flesh he'd been dying to taste.

She made not a whimper, but he understood her game. Hating him as she did, she would surely not utter one sound of pleasure unless he could rip it from her throat. And to do that he must keep a clear head. He must not lose control and start thinking about those shimmering curls at the sweet juncture of her thighs,

only inches from his mouth, or the silken nub that nestled within, the very center of her passion. From his position at her feet he reveled in every plane and curve of her perfect body. His eyes skimmed over her firm thighs, up her taut, slightly rounded belly, over her creamy breasts to the alabaster column of her neck where it met the black silk hood.

Adrienne knew that if something didn't happen fast, her legs were going to simply buckle beneath her and she would fall on his face. *Not a bad idea*, her mind offered. She was shocked. Aghast. But maybe...

She swayed forward slightly.

Hawk groaned as her shimmering curls brushed his unshaven cheek. Kneeling at her feet, he squeezed his eyes shut to banish the vision, the need, unaware that his tongue wet his lip and his mouth demanded...

Shaking, he growled and surged to his feet, and then his hands were on her body and he knew he was in serious trouble. *Where the hell had the Hawk gone?* he wondered as he tumbled her roughly back to the bed. Where was the Lothario? That legendary master of control who was going to tease her beyond endurance and shatter her defenses? Just where the hell had his will gone? *What will?* he wondered, for he was lost in a green field of innocence more sweet and lush than any he'd ever known.

Adrienne moaned when his body covered hers, pressing her down into the soft bed. He was every inch a hot, demanding man. *Oh, heavenly*, the woman within her purred. *Take me*, she wanted to cry. But not that easily, she wouldn't give in too quickly.

In a swift motion the Hawk ripped the hood off her head and kissed her, burying his hands in her hair. He kissed her so deeply that she lost her breath and the last remnants of her fear.

She'd kissed a few men before. More than a few. Timid kisses, passionate kisses. Eberhard kisses that had left her cold. A man didn't kiss like *this* unless he was very deeply in love.

He loved her. The awareness trembled in her, just under the top layer of her skin, then seeped deeper, penetrating fully. How magnificent, to know he loved her so

much. No question about it. He was cradling her face with his strong hands as if she were the most precious thing in the universe. She opened her eyes and met his troubled gaze, trying to say with her silvery silence all that she really felt, because she couldn't say the words. She didn't know how. No practice.

When he shifted her beneath him and his hard arousal rode between her legs she did it, made all that sound she'd sworn she wasn't going to. Practically roared. So this was it. This was what made people crazy with passion and longing and hunger. This was what Shakespeare had known at some time in his life to write *Romeo and Juliet*, to pen such sweet verses of love. This is what the Hawk had meant by Valhalla.

She arched up against him, the muscles deep within her on fire, burning for something, aching and empty.

"Ari," he breathed as he dropped his head to suckle one nipple into his mouth. He kissed and tugged and tortured it. He released the tightened crest and blew cool air on the heated tip. Nipped it lightly, then rubbed his rough, shadow beard gently across it. A flash of fire erupted in her, radiating outward from her breasts and flooding her entire body with waves of desire.

He scattered kisses lower, trailing across her stomach, the curve of her hips, her thighs. When he paused directly above her honeyed heat, his mere breath fanning her sensitive skin was sheer torture.

A heartbeat turned into a dozen, and she waited, frozen, for his next caress.

When it came, she whimpered softly. He dropped kisses on the satiny insides of her legs, then tasted the very center of her hunger. When his tongue flickered out, stroking her tiny, taut nub repeatedly, she cried out and her body quivered against him. She felt herself reaching, soaring for something just beyond her reach and then... oh!

How was it that she'd never experienced anything like this before? The Hawk flung her to the starlit heavens and spun her out between the planets, slid her down the Milky Way and through a star going supernova. Rocked her universe from end to end of its solar system. And when he finally, gently let her come back down, she shuddered beneath him with agony and ecstasy, knowing she would never be the same. Something had woken up inside her and blinked pale

eyes, unaccustomed to the blinding brightness and stunning intensity of this new world.

She lay, panting and a little bit frightened, but ready. Ready to truly and completely give herself to her husband and make their marriage soar as she knew it could. Ready to try to begin to tell him the things she felt for him. How much she really admired his sensitivity and compassion. How much she adored his strength and fearlessness. How much she even cherished his brash and passionate rages. How glad she was to be his wife. "Hawk—

"Ari, Ari... I... no. I don't..." His face was fierce and wild, and she reached for him. But she missed.

Because the Hawk stiffened with a roar of agony and leapt from the bed. Leapt from her, and practically ran from the room without looking back.

The room fell silent except for the click of a lock.

Adrienne stared in total confusion at the door.

This was like being bedded in roses and waking up in the mud.

How could he just up and leave her after *that*?

throbbing shaft would not be able to handle that torture again.

But he didn't want to give her his seed until he knew she belonged to him. Didn't want the possibility of not knowing whose child she might bear.

And then he recalled the flask that the old Rom had given him. He considered it thoughtfully, wondering if now was the time to use the potion it contained.

He may as well, he mused, although he hated the side effects. The way it would leave him cold and remote in the middle of the greatest passion he'd ever known.

* * * * *

The next time he came to her was in silence, from beginning to end.

A scarce quarter of an hour before, he'd grimaced as he'd pulled out the stopper with his teeth. He had sworn never to take the potion again, but this time it was necessary. He had to make her want him, to bind her to him with desire so he

could start working on making her love him. And he needed a clear head to do it.

Last night he'd almost made a fool of himself. He'd certainly lost control. Come close to spilling on her with both body and heart; foolish words of love and seed and hope for babies and a lifetime together.

So he tossed his head back and swallowed the bottle's bitter contents, and waited.

When he could feel its eerie fingers unfurling through his body, only then did he go to her.

He stripped her bare and guided her to the floor. She made no move to stop him; she remained mute, with an unfathomable expression in her eyes. It was mute fascination, but he didn't know that. Her eyes lovingly wandered over

CHAPTER 26

SIDHEACH JAMES LYON DOUGLAS DOES NOT SHAKE, HE reminded himself. Does not lose control. Does not almost start mooning about like some lovesick boy just because he gives a lass the orgasm of her life. He hadn't missed that.

But it wasn't the orgasm. Not even the way she'd shuddered against him, or how beautiful she'd looked as she'd panted, love-slicked, beneath his tongue.

It was that he'd been about to do something he'd never done in all his life—lose his seed outside of a lass. That and more, it was that he loved her and she still hadn't said his name. Not even in the apex of her passion had she cried his name. Nothing. For all he knew, she could have been thinking of Adam. It was part of why he'd had to pull the damned hood off her. The hood had seemed a good idea at the start, but it just had to go.

The next time he loved her, he'd have her eyes open and seeing him from start to finish, and finish it he would. His every inch of his body when he looked anywhere besides her face. She marveled at the sensation of cool floor to her back and hot man to her front, but he seemed somehow different this time as with his hands and his mouth he brought her to that shining place in the sky not once but a half-dozen times. Perfectly skilled, almost frighteningly controlled, while she lay aching beneath him.

She didn't like it one bit.

When he turned away from her, she felt somehow cheated. As if he hadn't really been there with her at all. So what if he pleased her well? She wanted the same sun glowing in his eyes, the same uncontrollable, wild passion that burned white-hot between them.

"Hawk!" she called to his back.

He stiffened and paused a long moment. Muscles bunched in his shoulders and back. He seemed so untouchable.

"Oh. Never mind..." she said softly, her eyes luminous and brimming with hurt.

* * * * *

Hours later the Hawk rinsed his mouth for the fifth time and spat into a basin. Well, that had been a disaster of epic proportions. It had hurt him more than it had helped him. The potion had kept up his enormous erection and not allowed him to spill anything.

Was there such a thing as a fire that froze?

He would never take that potion again. Not with his wife.

When he'd finally gotten the foul taste of it out of his mouth, he dressed and headed for the village gathering hall to hear more cases. More decisions and more people with needs he must see to. And all the while he knew he'd be wondering if he, who ruled numerous manors, villages, keeps, and men, was ever going to be able simply to make his own wife say his name.

Sidheach.

That's all he wanted.

* * * * *

Adrienne paced the room restlessly. What had happened this afternoon? She felt dirty, as if she'd been touched too intimately by a stranger, not been made love to by her husband. Not like the night before when she'd seen that look in his eyes, that warmth and tenderness along with the epic desire. He'd been detached somehow this afternoon. When he'd returned to their room to dress before he'd left again, he'd still been eerily distant. Had he done something, taken some drug to make him...?

Those flasks she'd seen. Lying in a leather pouch on the bed table last night.

Her jaw jutted as she stomped to the bed table. Not there.

Where had he put them? Her eyes flew to the clothes he'd dropped in the chair when he'd changed this afternoon. Rummaging through the pile, she found what she sought and dumped the little leather pouch. One empty, a full one left. Ha! That and the healing poultice he'd been using when he changed the bandage on his hand.

An empty flask. Hmmph! Well two could play that game, and he'd rue the day he left the other one just lying about. Wait until he saw just how cold she could be!

* * * * *

When the Hawk returned to the manor that night, he was unequivocally convinced he must have gone to the wrong house. His wife was waiting for him in the locked bedroom, completely nude, with a wild look in her eyes that made him quite certain he was dreaming, or lost or mad.

"Hawk," she purred as she glided to him.

"Adrienne?" he asked warily.

His wife was so damned beautiful. And for an instant he didn't care why she was acting this way. He was sick of the waiting and tired of the wanting. So he swung her up into his arms and kissed her, his hot mouth moving over hers hungrily.

Then he saw the flask lying on the floor by the bed, looking as if it had been dropped shortly after consumption.

Hawk blew out a breath of frustration and allowed himself one more longing look at his wife's flushed cheeks, her magnificent breasts, and curves that went on forever. One glance at her darkly dilated eyes and her poury mouth, plum-ripe and begging to be kissed.

"Lass, did you take that potion?" he said wearily.

"Uh-hmm," she drawled as she reached for his lips hungrily.

He dumped her on the bed with a thump. The aphrodisiac. He figured it should last about twelve hours before he could be certain she was back to her normal shrewish self.

It would serve her right for him to just take her right now, honor be damned, he thought darkly.

Unfortunately there were no circumstances under which honor could be damned. Not even when his throbbing shaft was making him wonder how the hell honor had anything to do with tugging his own wife.

Oh, she would surely want to kill him the next time she saw him.

He locked the door and stationed four guards outside it, telling them he'd kill any one of them who went in that room for any reason during the next twelve hours.

Then the legendary Hawk sat down on the stairs to wait it out.

* * * * *

The next time he came to her, she was indeed furious. "What was in that flask?" she raged.

Hawk couldn't help but smile. He tried to duck his head before she saw it, but failed.

"Oh! You think it's funny, do you? I'll have you know that you left me in here for a whole night thinking... oh my God! You have no idea how much I needed—"

"Not me, lass." His eyes were dark. "It was not me you needed. You took a bit of an aphrodisiac the Rom brew. I had no intention of giving it to you or using it myself. I didn't even ask them for it. And you snooped—"

"You took a potion to make yourself cold to me!" she shouted. "You hurt me!"

Hawk stared. "Hurt you? Never! I would not hurt you, lass."

"Well, you did!" Her eyes were wide and luminous and her lip trembled.

He was at her side in an instant. "How did I hurt you? Only tell me, and I will make it up to you."

"You were cold. You touched me and it was like you were a stranger."

Hawk's heart sang. Desire coursed through him in hot waves. She liked his touch.

"You like my touch?" he breathed before stealing a kiss from her pouty lips.

"Not when you do it like you did yesterday!" There was a furrow of consternation between her lovely brows and he kissed it away. "Besides, being that you wanted to bed me, why didn't you just take advantage of it when I was so willing?" she sighed as he traced soft kisses across her eyelids and her lashes

fluttered closed. His lips were warm and infinitely tender as he kissed the tip of her nose, then not quite so tender when he claimed her mouth with his.

"When I love you, 'twill not be because some drug has intoxicated you, but because you are intoxicated with me, as surely as I am bewitched by you."

"Oh," she breathed as he unbound her hair and let it tumble free down her shoulders.

"Why did you bind it?" He combed his fingers through her heavy mane.

"That potion was terrible. Even my own hair rubbing against my skin was too much to bear."

"'Tis too much for me to bear, this mane of yours," Hawk said, playing it gently through his fingers. His eyes turned hooded, darkly heavy with sensual promise. "You have no idea how often I imagined the feel of this silvery-gold fire spread across my shaft, lass."

Desire enveloped Adrienne as she pondered the image his words conjured.

He backed her slowly toward the bed, encouraged by the haze of desire in her wide eyes.

"The thought interests you, lass?" he purred smugly.

She swallowed hard.

"You have only to tell me, whisper to me what pleases you. I will give you it all."

She gathered her courage. "Then kiss me, husband. Kiss me here... and here... oooh!" He obeyed so quickly. His lips were hot, silky and demanding. "And here..." She lost her voice completely when he slid her gown from her body and tumbled her to the bed beneath him.

"I want to pull the drapes around this bed and keep you in here for a year," he mumbled against the smooth skin of her breast.

"S'all right, with me," she mumbled in response.

"Aren't you supposed to be fighting me, lass?" Hawk drew back and studied her intently.

"Um..."

"Yes, do go on," he encouraged. He knew his eyes must be dancing with joy. He knew he must have an absolutely absurd expression on his face right now. Was it possible? The taming had begun and was working?

"Just touch me." She wrinkled her brow. "Don't ask me so many questions about it!"

He rumbled with soft laughter and promise of infinite passion. "Oh, I'll touch you, lass."

* * * * *

"Too deep. You're in too far."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I've given it thought, fool. We must end this. Queen Aoibheal is on to us. Even your time by her side has not allayed her suspicions. I, for one, do not wish to suffer the consequences of her wrath. The woman is simply going to have to return to her time."

King Finnbheara waved his hand.

* * * * *

And the Hawk collapsed onto the bed. Stunned, he looked around the empty room.

Adrienne fell to the floor of her modern kitchen with a thud.

* * * * *

"Did you see what I saw?" King Finnbheara gasped.

Adam was stunned. "She was nude. He was panting. She was—oh shit!"

The King nodded emphatically as they both gestured. "*She stays.*"

It was one of the golden rules. Some things could never be interrupted.

* * * * *

"You really are from the future, aren't you?" Hawk whispered hoarsely, when Adrienne reappeared scant moments later, a few feet away from him on the bed. While Adrienne had been drinking in his study, Lydia had told him of the disappearance in the garden. The Hawk had tried to convince himself that Lydia was mistaken, but his guards had confirmed that they'd watched his wife disappear and reappear several times in quick succession.

So, she could still return to her own time, even without the chess piece. *The black queen is not what she seems.* The seer had spoken true.

Adrienne nodded, still dazed by her abrupt transfer through time. "And I can't control it! I don't know when it's going to happen again!" Her fingers flexed convulsively on the woolen coverlet as if a tight grip might prevent her from being taken again.

"By the saints," he breathed slowly. "The future. Another time. A time which hasn't happened yet."

They stared at each other, dumbstruck, for a prolonged moment. His raven eyes were deep with shadows, the beautiful golden flecks extinguished completely.

Suddenly Adrienne realized all too clearly that she *never* wanted to go back to the twentieth century. She didn't want to be without him for the rest of her life! Desperation curled cold fingers around her heart.

It was already too late. How she loved him! The abruptness with which she had been reminded that she had no control over how much longer she could stay; the knowledge that she might be shuttled back, never to return; the fact that she had no idea how, or if, she could come again by herself terrified her.

To be consigned, no, *condemned*, back to that cold and empty twentieth-century world, knowing that the man she would love for eternity had died almost five hundred years before she'd even been born, oh dear God, *anything* but that.

Awestruck by her realizations, she gazed at him, her lips parted, openly vulnerable.

Hawk sensed the change in her; some kind of wordless admission had just

occurred in that part of Adrienne he'd been trying to reach for so long. She was gazing at him with the same unfettered expression he'd seen that night on the cliffs of Dalkeith when she'd wished on a star.

It was all Hawk needed to see. He was on her in an instant. His awareness that she could be ripped from him at any moment made time infinitely precious. The present was all they had, and there were no guarantees for tomorrow.

He claimed her body, raining down upon her a storm of unleashed passion. He kissed and tasted, desperate with fear that any instant her lips might be torn from his. Adrienne kissed him back with complete abandon. Heat flared between them as it should have, as it would have from the very beginning had she permitted herself to dare to believe such passion, such love was possible.

Falling back on the bed, she melted beneath him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his hungry head closer.

"Love me... oh, love me," she whispered.

"Always," he promised into her wide-open eyes. He cupped her breasts and lavished them with kisses, savoring how wildly she responded to him. This time was different. She was really seeing *him*, Sidheach, not some other man she'd had before, and hope exploded in his heart. Was she coming to crave him as he did her? Could it be his wife was developing a hunger for him that matched his own appetite?

"Oh, please..." Her head arched back against the pillows. "Please..." she breathed.

"Do you want me, Adrienne?"

"Yes. With every ounce of my body..." *and soul* she was going to add, but he claimed her mouth with deep, hot kisses.

She wanted him, eyes open and seeing him. He could tell, this time it was real.

When her hand closed around his engorged phallus, a groan ripped from his throat.

"I saw you, you know," she whispered, her eyes dilated and dark with passion.

"In the Green Lady's room. You were lying flat on your back."

He stared at her in mute fascination, the muscles in his neck working furiously as he struggled to say something intelligible, anything, but only a husky purr came out as her hand tightened on him. So, she had watched him too? As he had spied on her every chance he got?

"You were lying there in your sleep like some Viking god, and that's the first time I saw this." She squeezed her hand gently for emphasis. He growled. Emboldened by his response, Adrienne pushed him back and scattered kisses across his sculpted chest. She ran her hungry tongue down over his abdomen, tasting each defined ripple in turn. She explored his powerful thighs and throbbing manhood, pausing to drop a tantalizing kiss on the velvety pink tip of the shaft a stallion would have envied.

"Did you find it passing... fair?" he croaked, "what you saw then, and see now?"

"Ummm..." She pretended to ponder his question, then licked a long, velvety stroke up his shaft from base to tip. "It'll do in a pinch."

He tossed his dark head back with a smile and roared. "A pinch... a pinch? I'll show you..." His words trailed off as he pulled her roughly into his embrace. His mouth claimed hers and he rolled her onto her back.

Too late to pull back or worry about seed or children, far beyond rational thought of any kind, and adrift in a musky madness named Adrienne, the siren witch who owned him, he slid between her legs and positioned himself above her.

Just before he ceded to her beckoning heat, he said, "I have always loved you, lass." Quietly and regally.

Tears shimmered in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. He touched a glistening drop with his finger and marveled for a moment at how good it felt to have her accept him at last. Then, past waiting, he plunged into her. More tears misted her eyes at the sudden pain. Above her, barely in her, the Hawk clenched his jaw and froze. He stared down at her a speechless moment, stunned and awed.

"Please," she urged. "Don't stop now. Please, I want this."

"Adrienne," he breathed, his face dark. "Virgin," he muttered dumbly. Ebony eyes held her gaze a breathless moment as his body lay rigid atop hers.

Then she felt an involuntary jerk rage through him and he pushed past the barrier, ripping into her with barbaric intensity. "Mine," he swore roughly, his black eyes flashing. "Only mine. First... best... and last." His beautiful head arched back, and she buried her hands deep in his hair. Again she felt that involuntary shudder that rocked him from head to toe.

There was momentary pain, but waves of heat quickly replaced it and the stars called her name, beckoning her to come fly. This time it was even more intense, calling from deep inside her where his hot shaft filled her all the way. An instinctive voice told her how to move, how to gain her pleasure and assure his in the same breath.

"Don't... move," he gritted against her ear, struggling to not spill the moment her sleek tightness encased him. He was beyond aroused, driven nearly insane by passion coupled with the knowledge that the smithy had never been where he was now. Not even the legendary Ever-hard, whoever he was. He was her first man, her first and only lover.

"I can't help it... feels too... oh!... Delicious!" Her hands caressed his back, then her nails lightly scored the bronzed skin of his shoulders as he rocked her slowly beneath him.

"Stop moving, lass!"

"I thought I was supposed to move... too," she mumbled, very nearly incoherently. "Please..."

"Be still. I would teach you slow first. Then the next time will be for the wild, rough love."

"Wild, rough love *now*," she demanded quite clearly, and it broke the tether that had been holding him so tautly in check. He raised her legs and drove into her, pushing the worry of her virgin sensitivity from what little of his mind remained. He came into her the way he'd wanted to from the very first moment he'd seen her—rough and claiming. Hard and demanding, with possession. Hungry and almost brutal, branding her his.

Adrienne spiraled beneath him, the tips of her fingers trailing against the stars as she fragmented into a thousand shimmering pinpoints. She felt him stiffen, then pulse heavily inside her. They exploded together in perfect rhythm, perfect harmony.

Hawk lay breathing harshly atop her for a long time while she contentedly petted her husband. His silky hair had come free from its thong. She traced the soft skin of his solid, muscled back. *Beautiful man*, she mused, and the thought no longer carried any taint of fear. She stroked his hair in silence, marveling at her life and how rich it was with him in it.

It was in silence that at last he raised himself from her and went to stand by the window, staring out into the night of Uster.

"Och, lass, what have I done?" he whispered to the glass pane.

Silence from behind him. Adrienne's eyes moved lovingly over every inch of her man.

"I judged thee inconstant and shrewish. I judged thee, sweet falcon, to be the worst of faithless vipers. My dark imaginings feathering in my heart with spiky wing. And I could not have been more wrong."

Still silence. He didn't know that behind him his wife had a tender smile curving her lips.

"Lass from future's distant short, you were dumped into a man's lap, wed to me sight unseen and have lived through hells of your own before ever coming to me. I have only given you one more hell to add to it. Full of my—och, wife, what have I done? Oh God, what have I done to you?"

"You loved me."

It wasn't a question, but he answered it readily. "I do. More than life. My heart. I didn't just pick a sweet turn of phrase to name you, but spoke from my soul when I named you thus. Without my heart I couldn't live. And I couldn't breathe without you."

"Are you a man who has more than one heart?"

"Nay. Only this one. But it's bitter and dark now from the pain I've brought you."

He stared out the window into the bottomless night. Virgin blood on his shaft. Virgin tears on his hands. Virgin wife who'd never lain with Adam, and in all her years, with no man. A trembling gift she'd had to give and he'd forced it from her with his own dark passion.

"Sidheach." The word was a steamy caress from her lips.

It must have been a figment of his imagination. Hawk thought he would suffer his life long the torture of waiting in vain for a word he knew he would never hear tumble forth from her lips. "I have so abused you, my heart. I will atone, I swear to you, I will find a way—"

"Sidheach." He felt her hands on his sides, her arms slipping around him from behind. She couldn't keep the truth from him any longer. She had to tell him, had to have whatever time the fickle gods would allow them to enjoy. She rested her cheek lovingly against his back, and felt a shudder steal through his powerful frame.

"Do I dream a twisted dream?" he whispered hoarsely.

"I love you, Sidheach."

He whirled about to face her, his eyes dark and shuttered. "Look at me and say that!" he thundered.

Adrienne cupped his darkly beautiful face in her hands. "I love you, Sidheach, flesh-and-blood husband. 'Tis the only reason I was ever able to hate you so well."

A shout of joy burst from his lips, but his eyes were still disbelieving.

"I've loved you since that night by the sea. And hated you harder for every minute of it."

"But the king's whore—"

"Say no more. I'm a selfish woman. Adrienne's husband is who you are now. No one else. But I thank the good king for so perfecting your skills," she teased saucily. Some things were better left to heal, unpicked at. And it didn't threaten

her anymore, because she understood that it was the noble, chivalrous part in him that had forced him to do whatever he'd had to do to protect those he loved. Although neither he nor Lydia had told her much, she'd been able to figure out a few things for herself.

He laughed at her audacity, then sobered quickly.

"I must wed you again. I want the vows. Between *us*, not some proxy." Was it magic that had tossed her through time? When she'd disappeared right out of his arms, he'd finally accepted it, that his wife had come to him from time's distant shores, and what could that be except magic? A magic he could not control.

But what if they could make some wee magic of their own? There were legends that wedding vows taken within the circle of the Samhain fires, on that powerful eve before the feast of the Blessed Dead, were binding beyond human understanding. What if they made their wedding vows, pledged before the mystical Rom, on such a sacred night? Could he bind his wife to him across any boundaries of time? He would try anything.

"Aye," she breathed with delight, "make it so."

"I'm only sorry I missed it to begin with. And had I known that it was you waiting for me at the Comyn keep I would have come myself, my heart. On the very first day of the troth."

But his eyes were still troubled and she raised a hand to brush the shadows away. He caught it and placed a kiss tenderly in her palm, then closed her fingers over it.

"Do you trust me, lass?" he asked softly.

Trust. Such a fragile, tenuous, exquisitely precious thing.

The Hawk watched her, the emotions flashing across her expressive face, wonderfully open to him now. He knew she was thinking of those black times of which she'd never spoken. One day she would confide in him all her most private thoughts and fears, and she would come to understand that no matter what had happened in her past, it could never change his feelings for her.

Adrienne gazed lovingly at the man who'd taught her how to trust again. The

man she'd lost her heart to hopelessly and helplessly. This man who liberally dripped honor, valor, compassion, and chivalry. Neither her past nor his had any relevance to love such as theirs. "Trust you, Sidheach? With all my heart and further then."

His smile was blinding. "Adrienne..."

"My lord?" her voice was soft and warm and carefree as a girl's.

When he took her in his arms, she shivered with desire. "My lord!"

* * * * *

Adrienne didn't see that above her head his eyes grew dark. How was he going to protect her? How could he assure her safety? How quickly could he get to Adam and find what was going on? Because no matter what winding corridors his mind wandered trying to unravel the strange happenings that involved his wife, they all seemed to come circling back to a grinding halt directly in front of that damned smithy. And it *wasn't* mere jealousy, although the Hawk would readily admit to an abiding dislike for the man.

It wasn't the black queen that had brought Adrienne to him, or so cruelly ripped her from him. That was a fact.

So what was it?

Someone or something else had that power. The power to destroy the laird of Dalkeith with one blow—by taking his cherished wife away from him. What game, what terrible, twisted amusement was being played out upon Dalkeith's shore? What power had taken an interest and why?

I came here to hate you, Hawk. But I did not come here to hate the woman you claim as wife. Adam's words echoed in his mind, and he began to see just the vague outline of a carefully plotted revenge. But that would mean Adam Black had powers the Hawk had never quite believed existed. Bits and pieces of Rom stories he'd heard as a lad resurfaced in his whirring mind, raising questions and doubts. Stories about Druids and Picts and, aye, even the nefarious and mischievous Fairy. Lydia had always said that any legend was based in some part on fact, the mythical elements being merely the inexplicable but not necessarily untrue.

Oh, his love was testing the limits of his belief in the natural world and blowing them wide open.

But if he conceded belief in such magic as time travel, what magic could he discard as too outrageous? None. He could discard no possibility, however unearthly, without thorough consideration.

Adam Black had been able to cure the previously incurable poison of Callabron. Adam Black always seemed to know too damned much. Adam Black admitted flatly that he had come to Dalkeith for revenge.

The Rom had moved far from the smithy's forge. The Rom who *believed* the myths and legends.

And the Hawk, indebted to Adam for his wife's life, had forced himself to overlook all the oddities, attributing them to his intense dislike of the smithy, convincing himself that he was seeing dragons in the puffy shapes of harmless clouds.

He would never let her go, but someone or something else could take her from him at a moment's whim.

He would seek it, destroy it, and free her—on his life he vowed it.

For there was no life for him without her.

CHAPTER 27

ALTHOUGH THE HAWK INSISTED ON LEAVING EARLY THE NEXT morning, he also made sure they took their sweet time on the way back to Dalkeith. He sent half the guards to ride ahead and commanded the other half to stay well behind him and his lady, to allow them privacy. He would return to Uster and oversee the rest of the manorial courts in the future, after this battle was done.

Adrienne was thrilled by his urgency to return to Dalkeith to seal their vows. She was equally thrilled by the three-day journey, with long dalliances in chilly pools of bubbling spring water. Longer interludes of passion on springy moss beneath the canopy of brightly fluttering leaves. Moments in which he teased, coaxed, and taught her until the blushing virgin grew confident in her newly discovered womanhood, thrilled to feel a woman's power over her man. She soon became expert in the subtle ways of touching or speaking, of wetting a lip and beckoning with her eyes. She knew the stolen caresses and the instant responses that turned her sweet, beautiful man into a throbbing, hardened savage.

She was mildly stunned to discover that autumn had painted the hills with the inspiration of a master; leaves in brilliant shades of pumpkin, bloodwine, and buttery amber rustled crisply beneath the horse's hooves as they rode beneath boughs of harvest gold. Squirrels chirped and skittered through the trees with gravity-defying leaps. Scotland in all her majestic glory, airbrushed by love, colored the simple gifts of nature into a tapestry of miracles. Adrienne had never realized the world was such a wonderful place.

She would remember the leisurely return journey to Dalkeith as her honeymoon; a time of phenomenal passion and tender romancing. A time of blissful healing and loving. Quite simply, the happiest days of her life.

* * * * *

Late on the second day, as they lay on a Douglas tartan of blues and grays, an unaddressed hurt surfaced to poke at Adrienne and she couldn't stay her tongue. Gripping the Hawk's face between her hands, she kissed him hard, hot, and tempting, then pulled back and said, "If you ever forbid me from you again, my husband, I will tear down the walls of Dalkeith, stone by stone, to get to you."

The Hawk shook his head, his thoughts completely muddled by the tantalizing kiss and further bewildered by her words. He claimed her lips in a long, equally fierce kiss, and when she lay panting softly beneath him, he said, "If you ever fail to see how I am faring after being wounded, I will add a stone tower onto Dalkeith and lock you in there, my captive love-slave, never to refuse me anything again."

It was her turn to study him with a bewildered expression, her lips full and rosy from the heat of his kiss. "If you mean after you were injured by the arrow, I *tried* to see you. Grimm wouldn't let me."

Hawk's gaze battled with hers. "Grimm said you never came. He said you were sleeping soundly in the Peacock Room with naught a worry in your mind, save how soon I would die and leave you free."

Adrienne gasped. "Never! I was right outside your door. Arguing and fighting with him. Still, he swore you refused me entrance!"

"I have never refused you entrance. Nay, I opened my very soul and bade you enter. Now you're telling me that you came to see me that night, and Grimm told you I had given orders that you were to be refused?"

Adrienne nodded, wide-eyed.

Dark fury flitted across the Hawk's face as he recalled the agony he'd endured, believing she'd not cared enough to see if he still lived and breathed. Suddenly he understood his friend's stiff behavior that night. The way Grimm's gaze had not seemed quite steady. The nervous way he'd built up the already blazing fire and had poked aimlessly at the crackling logs. "Grimm, what mischief do you play?" he murmured. Could Grimm wish Adrienne ill? Or had Grimm only been trying to protect him, his friend and brother-in-arms, from further harm?

Regardless, his actions were unacceptable. No matter how long-standing their friendship, lies were never tolerable. And Grimm's lies had driven a wedge between him and his wife, a wedge that had sent the Hawk rushing off to Uster. What if he hadn't returned for Adrienne? How far might Grimm's lies have taken them apart from each other? What might Adam have done to his wife if he hadn't returned for her?

The Hawk's mouth tightened. Adrienne laid her palm against his cheek and said softly, "Hawk, I don't think he meant any harm. He seemed to be trying to protect you. He said I had brought you nothing but pain, and that it was all his fault."

"*His* fault?"

"For wishing on a star."

The Hawk snorted. "Wishes on stars don't come true, lass. Any addlebrained bairn knows that."

Adrienne cocked a mischievous brow at him. "But he did say he wished for the perfect woman." She preened. "And I do fit the bill," she teased.

"Aye, that you do," the Hawk growled. With a wicked smile, he cupped one of her perfect breasts in his hand and pushed her back upon the tartan as their passion began once again. His last coherent thought before he lost himself in the beauty and wonder that was his wife, was that Grimm owed him some answers and his wife an apology. And, if he had to admit it, that for all he knew maybe wishes on falling stars did come true. Stranger things had happened of late.

* * * * *

On the last day, Hawk rode as if hell-bent. *Stole three days*, he mused darkly, holding his wife to his chest in his possessive embrace, his cheek brushing her silky hair.

In the woods he had felt safe, that whatever enemy threatened her didn't know where she was at that moment. So he'd prolonged it and spun it out to make it last, keeping his worries away from his wife, wanting nothing to spoil her pleasure.

Besides, he kept collapsing into near slumber every time his demanding young wife had her way with him. Damnedest odd thing. He'd never fallen so replete and satisfied to the ground. Oh, but that lass had some *serious* magic.

But now his mind turned darkly to the matter that lay ahead. Until the feast of the Blessed Dead, Rushka had warned. The Samhain was tomorrow, the day after the Samhain was the feast of the Blessed Dead—or All Saints, as some called it.

The Samhain was a perilous time for any to be alone. It was rumored that the Fairy walked the earth in full glamour on such a night. It was rumored that wickedness abounded on the Samhain, which was why the clans laid the double bonfire of birch, rowan, oak, and pine, and carved deep trenches around it. There they gathered to a one, every man, woman, and child, and feasted together in the protective rim of light. Within that ring, he would pledge his life to his wife and try to make some magic of their own.

He could just feel it in his bones that something was about to go very wrong.

SAMHAIN

(Harvest)

For nothing this wide universe I call,

Save thou, my rose; in it thou art my all.

SHAKESPEARE, SONNETS CIX

CHAPTER 28

ADAM HISSED AS HE LEFT THE FAIRY ISLE OF MORAR. TIME, usually of no significance to him, had flashed past him, day by precious day. When he played a mortal game, time became a nagging concern. For too long he'd neglected his doings at Dalkeith, but it had taken some time to convince his Queen that he was up to no mischief.

Now the far-seeing Adam turned his mind toward Dalkeith to study the changes in his game. He stiffened and hissed again. How dare they?

When his Queen had said the damning words sealing the Hawk's fate, Adam had searched far and wide for the perfect tool of revenge. He had wandered through the centuries, listening, watching, and finally choosing the perfect woman with careful precision. Adam was not one to muck in the lives of mortals often, but when he did, legends arose. And Adam liked that.

Some called him Puck. A Bard would name him Ariel.

Still others knew him as Robin Goodfellow. The Scots called him the *sin siriche du*—the black elf. Occasionally, Adam donned the visage of a charging and headless horseman, or a grim-faced specter carrying a scythe, just to live long in the memories of mortals. But whatever the glamour chose, he *always* won what he set out to win. And he'd been so certain of success this time! The woman had not only grown up in magical New Orleans, she'd sworn off men so vehemently that he'd heard her through the centuries. Adam had watched her for weeks before he'd made his careful choice; he'd studied her, learned everything there was to know about the fascinating Adrienne de Simone. Things even her beloved husband didn't know about her. He had been convinced that she was the one woman guaranteed to hate the legendary Hawk.

Now, as Adam moved toward Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea, his far-reaching vision revealed a blissful Adrienne, wedding plans lazing dreamily in her mind.

But the Hawk, ah... the Hawk wasn't so comfortable right now. He sensed something was wrong. He would be prepared.

Adam had brought Adrienne here to reject the Hawk, and of course, to claim the

beauty for himself. Rarely was such a stirring mortal creature born as that woman. Even the King had commented on her perfection. What sweet revenge, to wed the Hawk to a woman who would never love him, while Adam made her his own. To cuckold the man who'd humiliated the Fairy King. But it seemed that he'd been as wrong about Adrienne as he'd been about the Hawk. Underestimated them both, he had.

She loved the Hawk as intensely as the Hawk loved her.

Adam drew up short, and grinned craftily as inspiration struck. What a tiny revenge that would have been to merely cuckold the Hawk.

A new and truly devastating possibility now occurred to him.

* * * * *

Lydia and Tavis were sitting on the cobbled terrace of Dalkeith when the Hawk and Adrienne arrived late that night.

Deep in the shadows, talking softly and sipping sweet port, they watched the younger couple ride in, dismount, and link hands as they moved toward the terrace. Lydia's eyes shimmered with happiness as she watched.

Adrienne said something that made the Hawk laugh. When he pulled her to a lazy halt and kissed her, she tugged the thong free from his hair and flung it into the night. What started as a tender kiss deepened hungrily. Long moments rippled by as the kiss unfurled. Lingering and savage and hot, the laird of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea and his lady kissed. Beneath an almost full moon, on the lawn directly in front of the terrace, they kissed.

And kissed.

Lydia's smile faded, and she shuffled in her chair uncomfortably. She forced herself to draw a deep, difficult breath and willed her heart to stop that ridiculous thundering. She'd thought her body might have finally forgotten such passion. Little chance of that.

"That's quite a kiss, I'll say." Tavis's rich brogue rolled over her.

"Qu-quite... a kiss." Lydia swallowed. How long had it been since a man had kissed her that way?

Tavis moved imperceptibly closer and Lydia glanced sharply at him.

Then her gaze turned speculative.

Tavis MacTarvitt was one fine figure of a man, she noted. How did it come to pass that she had failed to see that before now? And why that secretive smile on his face? she wondered. "What are you smiling about?" she snapped.

"'Tis a fine night on Dalkeith, I'll say," he offered benignly. "They've come home. And it looks to me like we'll be having wee bairns around here soon, and I'll say that again."

"Hmmpf." Lydia snorted. "Have you figured out how to make coffee yet, old man? I'd love to have a good cup for her in the morning."

"Milady." His gentle gaze chided her. "I'm a man of talented hands, remember? Of course I can make coffee."

Talented hands. The words lingered in her mind a moment longer than she would have liked, and she stole a surreptitious peek at those hands. Good hands, they were, indeed. Broad and strong, with long, clever fingers. Able. They tanned soft hides and tenderly pruned young roses. They brushed her hair gently, and made tea. What other pleasures might those hands be capable of lavishing upon a woman? she wondered. *Och, Lydia, you've been wasting many fine years, haven't you, lass?* the true voice of her heart, silent all these years, finally found its tongue.

Lydia subtly shifted closer to Tavis so that their arms rested lightly side by side. It was a soft touch, but it was meant to tell him many things. And it did.

Deeper in the night, when Tavis MacTarvitt laid one aging yet still strong and capable hand atop hers, Lydia of Dalkeith pretended not to notice.

But she curled her fingers tightly around his, just the same.

* * * * *

It was early in the morning, the time when the cool moon briefly rides in tandem with the sun, that Adrienne felt the Hawk slip from the hand-hewn bed in the Peacock Room. She shivered in the fleeting coolness before the covers draped snugly to her body again. The spicy scent of him clung to the blankets and she

buried her nose in it.

When they'd ridden in last night, the Hawk had swept her into his arms and vaulted the stairs three at a time, carrying his blushing wife past gaping servants. He'd called for a steaming bath to be delivered to the laird's bedroom and they had bathed in scented, sensuous oil that clung to their bodies. He'd made fierce and possessive love to her on a mound of tangled throws before the fire, and oiled by the fragrant blend, their bodies had slipped and slid with exquisite friction.

Adrienne had been claimed and branded by the man's hand. Conquered and ravished and utterly devoured. She had willingly dismissed all conscious thought, become an animal to mate her wild black charger. When he carried her to the bed, she'd run her hands over his body, over his face in the sweet afterglow, memorizing every plane and angle and secreting that memory away in her hands.

But somehow between the magnificent lovemaking and the sleeping, a silence had fallen between the lovers. It lay there, a stranger's gauntlet downflung in their bed. She had felt it grow into a fist of silence as she'd gotten lost in fears over which she had no control.

Desperately, she'd threaded her fingers through the Hawk's. Perhaps if she held on to him tightly enough, if she was tossed back to the future, she might take him with her. __

She had spent many stiff hours pretending to sleep. Afraid to sleep.

And just now, as he slipped from the bed, she felt the fear returning.

But she *couldn't* hold his hand every minute of every day!

She rolled silently onto her side, peeped out from the pile of covers, and marveled.

He stood at the arched window, his head cocked as if listening to the breaking morn and hearing secrets in the cries of the wakening gulls. His hands were splayed on the stone ledge of the opening, the last rays of moonbeam caressing his body with molten silver. His eyes were dark pools of shadow as he gazed into the dawn. His stern profile might have been chiseled of the same stone used to

build Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea.

She closed her eyes when he reached for his kilt.

The silence unfisted and wrapped its fingers around her heart as he left the Peacock Room.

* * * * *

Hawk stood in the doorway on the second floor, his eyes dark with rage.

Rage at his own helplessness.

Bringing her back to Dalkeith had been a mistake. A big mistake. He knew it. The very air inside Dalkeith seemed charged, as if someone had sloshed lamp oil all over the castle and now lay in wait, ready to drop a lit candle and step back to watch their lives be devoured by the ensuing inferno. No question remained in his mind—Dalkeith was not safe for her.

But she'd disappeared in Uster too.

Then they'd just have to go farther away. China, perhaps. Or Africa. At least get the hell out of Scotland.

Damn it all! Dalkeith was *his* place. *Their* place.

Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea had been his entire life. He'd endured so much to have this time. To come home. To watch their sons play at the cliff's edge. To watch their daughters race through the gardens, little feet pattering across mosses and cobbled walkways. On a warm day, to bathe their children in a clear blue loch. On a balmy summer night, to seduce his wife in the fountain beneath shimmering stars.

He deserved to spend the remainder of his years walking with Adrienne over these hills and vales, watching the sea and the seasons' eternal march across the land, building a home rich with love and memories and adventures. Every bit of it—damn it—he was a selfish man! He wanted the whole dream. *Should have stayed away, Hawk, and you know it. What made you think you could fight something you can't even name?* He closed his eyes tightly and swayed in the dark. Give up Dalkeith for her? His head fell forward, bowed beneath the weight of crushing decisions. A sigh to extinguish bonfires shuddered through his body.

Aye. He would wed her at the Samhain. Then he would take her as far away from here as they had to go. He'd already started to say his goodbyes in a strained silence. Goodbyes took some time, and there was much he needed to bid farewell at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea.

To risk staying where whatever forces commanded his wife? Patently impossible. "We can't stay," he told the silent, waiting room—the one room he needed to bid farewell most strongly. His nursery. "Running is the only intelligent thing to do in this case. 'Tis the only sure way to keep her safe."

He rubbed his eyes and leaned an arm against the doorjamb, struggling to tame the emotions coursing through him. He was captivated, bound beyond belief to the lass sleeping innocently in his bed. This night shared with her had been all he'd ever dreamed he might one day know. The incredible intimacy of making love to a woman whose very thoughts he could read. It wasn't just making love—tonight when their bodies had melded together in passion, he felt such complete kindred that it knocked him off balance. If nothing else, it shifted and tumbled his priorities into perfect position. *She comes first.*

Hawk's jaw tensed, and he cursed softly. His eyes wandered lovingly over the cradles, the carved toys, the soft woolens, and the high windows opening to a velvet dawn. He could give her a babe—hell, she might carry his already. And someone or something could rip her and the babe right out of his arms and his life. It would destroy him.

Dalkeith would prosper without him; Adrian would make a fine laird. Lydia would summon him home from France. Ilysse would keep his mother company and Adrian would wed and bring babies to this nursery.

He would suffer no regrets. He could have babies with Adrienne in a crofter's hut and be just as happy.

The Hawk stood a few moments more, until the flicker of a smile curved his lip.

He closed the door on his old dream with a gentle smile and a kind of reverence only a man in love fully understands. A room had never been his dream at all.

She was his dream.

* * * * *

"Hawk!" Lydia's lower lip trembled an unspoken protest. She averted her gaze to study an intricate twining of roses.

"It must be done, Mother. 'Tis the only way I can be certain she's safe."

Lydia busied her hands with the careful pinching away of dried leaves, pruning her roses as she'd pruned them for thirty years. "But to leave! Tonight!"

"We can't risk staying, Mother. There's no other choice I can make."

"But Adrian isn't even here," she protested. "You can't relinquish the title if no one's here to claim it!"

"*Mother.*" Hawk didn't bother to point out to her how absurd that protest was. From the sheepish look on her face it was obvious she knew she was grasping at any excuse she could find.

"You're talking about taking my grandbabies away!" Lydia squinted hard against tears.

Hawk regarded her with a mixture of deep love and amused patience. "They're grandbabies you don't even have yet. And ones we won't get a chance to make if I lose her to whatever it is that controls her."

"You could take her far from these shores and *still* lose her, Hawk. Until we discover what controls her, she won't ever really be safe," Lydia argued stubbornly. "She and I had planned to investigate the details of each time she traveled, to discover similarities. Have you done that?"

Hawk shook his head, his gaze shuttered. "Not yet. Truth be told, I've been loath to bring it up. She doesn't. I keep my silence. Once we've wed and left, there will be time to speak of it."

"Hawk, perhaps the Rom—"

Hawk shook his head impatiently. He'd already tried that tactic this morning. It had been his last ditch chance. He'd found Rushka up on the southwest ridge with his people, digging the trenches and gathering the seven woods for the fires. But Rushka had flatly refused to discuss his wife in any capacity. Nor had the Hawk been able to lure him into a conversation about the smithy. Damned

irritating that he couldn't even force answers from those who depended upon him for his hospitality. But the Rom—well, the Rom truly depended upon no man's hospitality. When things became difficult, they moved on to a better place. Absolute freedom, that.

Nor had the Hawk, for that matter, been able to find the damned smithy.

"Mother, where's Adam?"

"The smithy?" Lydia asked blankly.

"Aye. The forge was cold. His wagon's gone."

"Fair to tell, I haven't seen him since... let's see... probably since the two of you left for Uster. Why, Hawk? Do you think he has something to do with Adrienne?"

Hawk nodded slowly.

Lydia attacked from another angle. "Well, see! If you take Adrienne away and Adam does have something to do with it, he can just follow you. Better to stay here and fight."

She gasped when the Hawk turned his dark gaze toward her. "Mother, I will not risk losing her. I'm sorry that doesn't please you, but without her... ah, without her..." He lapsed into a brooding stillness.

"Without her what?" Lydia asked faintly.

The Hawk just shook his head and walked away.

* * * * *

Adrienne walked slowly through the bailey looking for the Hawk. She hadn't seen him since he'd left their bed early that morning. Although she knew she'd be standing beside him soon pledging her vows, she couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to go wrong.

She approached the mossy stones of the broch. Looking at it reminded her of the day Hawk had given her the first lesson in how a falcon was tamed.

How *deliriously* a falcon was tamed.

She opened the door and peered inside, a faint smile curving her lip. How frightened and fascinated she'd been by the Hawk that day. How tempted and hopeful, yet unable to trust.

Was that the flutter of wings she heard? She squinted into the gloom, then stepped in.

A part of her wasn't surprised at all when the door closed swiftly behind her.

As she was plunged into darkness she had an abrupt flash of understanding. This was the danger she had so feared—whatever or whoever was behind her.

Adrienne felt as if she'd been balancing on the edge of a razor since last night, waiting for something bad to happen. Now she understood perfectly what had kept her awake all night—it had been her instincts again, warning her of impending doom, clamoring that it was just a matter of time before her world fell apart.

And whoever was behind her was certainly the harbinger of her destruction.

"Beauty."

Adam's voice. Adrienne's body went rigid. Her jaw tensed and her hands fisted when he grabbed her in the darkness and pressed his hips hard against the curve of her rump. She lurched forward but he tightened his arms around her and dragged her back against his body.

When his lips grazed her neck she tried to scream, but not a sound came out.

"You knew I'd come," he breathed against her ear, "didn't you, lovely one?"

Adrienne wanted to protest, to scream denial, but some part of her *had* known—on a visceral, deeply subconscious level. In that instant, all her strange encounters with Adam Black were suddenly washed crystal-clear in her mind. "You made me forget," she hissed, as memories flooded her. "The strange things you did—when you took the Hawk's face at the fountain—you made me forget somehow," she accused.

Adam laughed. "I made you forget when I took you to Morar too, even earlier than that. Do you remember lying in the sand with me now, sweet Beauty? I'm

giving them back to you, those stolen times. Remember me touching you? Remember when I took you to my world to cure you? I touched you then, too."

Adrienne shuddered as the memories unfogged in her mind.

"I take from you what you don't need to recall, Beauty. I could take from you memories you'd love to lose. Shall I, Beauty? Shall I free you from Eberhard forever?" Adam pressed his lips to her neck in a lingering kiss. "No, I have it, I shall erase every memory you have of the Hawk—make you hate him, make him a stranger to you. Would you like that?"

"Who are you?" Adrienne choked as tears filled her eyes.

Adam turned her slowly in his arms until she faced him. His face was icy and definitely not human in the grayish half-light. "The man who's going to destroy your husband and everything at Dalkeith if you don't do exactly as I say, lovely Adrienne. I suggest you listen to me very, very carefully if you love him."

* * * * *

Hawk couldn't find Adam. He couldn't find Grimm. And now he couldn't find his own wife. What the hell kind of wedding day was this?

The Hawk paced through the lower bailey calling her name, his hands clenched into fists. On the ridge, people had already started to gather. Clanspeople were arriving in droves from miles around. Come twilight there would be nearly seven hundred plaids gathered on Dalkeith's shore; the Douglas was a large clan with many crofters tilling the land. Earlier in the morning the Hawk had sent his guard into the hills and vales announcing the laird's wedding this eve, thus ensuring the attendance of every last person, young and old.

But there wouldn't be any wedding if he couldn't find his wife.

"Adrienne!" he called. Where the hell had she gone? Not in the castle, not in the gardens... not at Dalkeith?

Nay!

"Adrienne!" he roared, his pace quickening to a run. Calling her name, he sped past the falcon broch.

"Hawk, I'm here!" He heard her cry echo behind him.

"Adrienne?" He skidded to a halt and turned.

"I'm right here. Sorry," she added as she closed the door to the broch and stepped outside.

"Don't *ever* leave me again without telling me where you're going. Didn't you hear me calling you?" he growled, fear roughening his voice.

"I said I'm sorry, Hawk. I must have been woolgathering." She paused where she stood.

Hawk's heart twisted in his chest. He'd found her, but why hadn't that erased his fear? Something nagged—a thing intangible, yet as real and potentially treacherous as the jagged cliffs of Dalkeith. There was an almost palpable odor of wrongness hovering in the air around the broch.

"Lass, what's wrong?" he asked. Every inch of him tensed as she stepped out of the shadows that darkened the east side of the squat tower. Half her face was deeply shadowed by the sun's descent, the other half was visibly pale in the fading light. Hawk suffered a fleeting moment of impossible duality; as though half her face was smiling while the other was drawn tightly in a grimace of pain. The macabre illusion chased a spear of foreboding through his heart.

He extended his hands, and when she didn't move from that strange half domino of light and darkness, he strode brusquely forward and pulled her into his arms.

"What ails you, sweet wife?" he demanded, gazing down at her. But he hadn't pulled her forward far enough. That hated shadow still claimed a full third of her face, concealing her eyes from him. With a rough curse he back-stepped until she was free of darkness. That shadow, that damned shadow from the broch had made him feel as if half of her was becoming insubstantial and she might melt right through his hands and he would be helpless to prevent it. "Adrienne!"

"I'm fine, Hawk," she said softly, sliding her arms around his waist.

As the fading light bathed her face, he felt suddenly foolish, wondered how he could have thought, even for a moment, that there was a shadow eclipsing her lovely face. There was no shadow there. Naught but her wide silver eyes

brimming with love as she gazed up at him.

A trembling moment passed, then her lip curved in a sweet smile. She brushed a stray fall of dark hair back from his face and kissed his jaw tenderly. "My beautiful, beautiful Hawk," she murmured.

"Talk to me, lass. Tell me what fashes you so," he said roughly.

She flashed him a smile so dazzling that it muddled his thoughts. He felt his worries scattering like petals to the wind beneath the soft promises unspoken in that smile.

He brushed his lips to hers and felt that jolt of immediate response tingle through his body from head to toe. *What shadow?* Foolish fears, foolish fancy, he realized wryly. He was letting his imagination run wild at the slightest provocation. A silly shadow fell across her face and the great Hawk suffered visions of doom and desolation. Bah! No lass could smile like that if she was worried about something.

He took her lips in a brutal, punishing kiss. Punishing for the fear he'd felt. Punishing, because he needed her.

And she melted to him like liquid flames, molding and pressing herself against him with fierce urgency. "Hawk..." she whispered against his lips. "My husband, my love, take me... again, please."

Desire surged through his veins, conquering all traces of his panic. He needed no further encouragement. They had a few hours left to them before the man of God would bind them beneath the Samhain mantle. He pulled her toward the broch.

Adrienne stiffened instantly. "Nay, not in the broch."

So he took her to the stables. To a thick pile of sweet purple clover where they spent the remaining hours of the afternoon of their wedding like a beggar's precious last coins on a splendid feast.

CHAPTER 29

ADRIENNE'S WEDDING DRESS SURPASSED ALL OF HER childhood dreams. It was made of sapphire silk and elegant lace, with shimmery threads of silver embroidered at the neck, sleeves, and hem in patterns of twining roses. Lydia had produced it proudly from a sealed chest of cedar-lined oak; yet another of the Hawk's clever inventions. She'd aired it out, steamed it in a closed kitchen over vats of boiling water, then lightly scented it with lavender. The gown clung at the bosom and hips, and fell to the floor in swirls of rich fabric.

It had been stitched by the Rom, Lydia told her as she and a dozen maids fussed over Adrienne, for Lydia's wedding to the Hawk's father. Lydia's wedding had also been celebrated at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea at the Beltane festival, before the same kind of double fires laid at the Samhain.

But Lydia had gone ahead now, up to the ridge. The maids were gone too, shooed on by Adrienne a quarter-hour past. It had taken every ounce of Adrienne's courage to get through the past few hours.

Lydia had been so elated, practically dancing around the room, and Adrienne had felt so wooden inside—forcing herself to pretend. She was about to do something that was guaranteed to make Lydia and Hawk despise her, and she had no other choice.

How could she bear the looks on their faces when she did it? How would she endure the hate and betrayal she would see in their eyes?

Adrienne stood alone in Lydia's lovely bedroom, amidst slowly cooling round irons and discarded choices for underthings and half-empty cups of tea, left undrunk in nervous anticipation.

The time was nearing.

And her heart was freezing, breath by bitter breath. She shivered as a crisp breeze tumbled through the open window of Lydia's bedroom. She crossed the room intending to close it, but froze, one hand upon the cool stone ledge. She stared mesmerized into the night.

I will remember this, always.

She drank in Dalkeith, committing each precious detail to memory. The full moon held her spellbound as it bathed the ridge in silvery brilliance. It seemed closer to the earth and so much larger than usual. Maybe she could step into the sky to stand right next to it—perhaps give it a firm nudge and watch it roll across the horizon.

Adrienne marveled at the beauty of it all. *This place is magic.*

She had a perfect view of the feast from the window. The ridge was alive with hundreds of people spread about the fires on bright tartans, talking, feasting, and dancing. Wine, ale, and Scotch flowed freely as the people celebrated the harvest to come. A rich harvest, her husband had seen to that.

Children played children's games, running and squealing and circling back to loving parents. And the music... oh, the music drifted up to the open window, blending with the soft roar of the ocean. The powerful hypnotic beat of the drums, the pipes and wild chanting.

Between the two circles of fire, she could just make him out, the laird of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea was dancing with his people, his head tossed back, adding his deep butterscotch cry to the song. Her husband. At least she'd gotten to love him for a while—maybe not forever, but...

The beat of drums intensified, and she watched him circle the fire. So primitive and savage, yet so incredibly tender and loving.

I adore this place, she thought. If I could have ever dreamt a place to go, back in the twentieth century, I would have dreamt this one.

She let her forehead fall against the cool stone wall a long moment and squeezed back the tears. "I love him more than life itself," she whispered aloud.

And *that* had been the deciding point.

* * * * *

"Nay." The Hawk raised his hands in mock protestation. "You must leave me with strength to wed and bed my wife, this eve," he teased the laughing women who tried to lure him into yet another dance.

Despite the disappointed looks and saucy remarks about his virility, the Hawk made his way higher up the ridge. He'd seen Lydia wander that way with Tavis while he'd been dancing. He paused a moment and looked back at the castle, his eyes searching the windows intently. There it was. Lydia's room, his wife's silhouette visible against the brightly lit window. He watched her turn her back. She was on her way.

A chill slithered up the nape of his neck as he studied her back. He watched a long moment, and when she didn't move, he wondered what she was doing.

I should have insisted she keep the guard with her.

Will they button my gown for me? she'd teased, and a swirl of jealousy at the thought of any of his guards touching his wife's silken skin had sealed it.

He could watch every step of her progress from the ridge, and the castle wasn't entirely deserted. The ridge was a short walk, a few minutes or less. *She should be fine.* Yet he worried...

"Have you seen Grimm?" Lydia touched his arm lightly to get his attention.

Hawk tore his gaze from the window. "Nay. Have you?"

"Nay. And that worries me. He's your best friend, Hawk. I thought he'd be here. What might have kept him?"

Hawk shrugged and glanced quickly at the castle. Ah, finally. The candles were out and his wife was on her way. Lydia's room was full dark. Suddenly Grimm seemed inconsequential. Even his irritation at Grimm's lies slid off his shoulders with the thought of his beloved Adrienne.

Tonight I will bind her to me for all eternity, he pledged silently.

"Hawk?" Lydia waved her hand in front of his face and he dragged his gaze from the castle with an effort.

"Hmmm?"

"Oh my," Lydia sighed. "How you *do* remind me of your father when you look like that."

"Like what?" Hawk drawled, watching the front steps for the first glimpse of his wife.

"Like some savage Viking set to conquer and take captive."

"I'm the captive in this, Mother," Hawk snorted. "The lass has fair spelled me, I think."

Lydia's laughter tinkled merrily. "Good. 'Tis as it should be, then." She gave him a brisk kiss. "She'll be here any moment." Lydia straightened his linen that didn't need straightening, smoothed his perfect hair that didn't need smoothing, and in general clucked over him like a nervous hen.

"Mother," he growled.

"I just want you to look your best—" Lydia broke off. She spared a nervous laugh for herself. "Just look at me, a jittery mother, all in a tizzy at her son's wedding."

"She's already seen me at my worst and loves me in spite of it. And what are you doing fussing over me? I thought we weren't speaking. What plans are you devising now?" he demanded. He knew her too well to believe she'd just capitulated quietly to his plans to leave this evening.

"Hawk," Lydia protested, "you wound me!"

Hawk snorted. "I'll ask you again, what nefarious plot have you devised to try to keep us here? Did you drug the wine? Hire ruthless mercenaries to hold us captive in my own castle? Nay, I have it—you dispatched a messenger to the MacLeod telling them now might be a good time to lay siege to Dalkeith, right?" He wouldn't be surprised if she'd done any of those things. Lydia was formidable when she set her mind on something. Nothing was beyond her if it might mean keeping Adrienne by her side. *Like mother like son*, he acknowledged ruefully.

Lydia glanced studiously away. "I simply refuse to think of you leaving until the time comes that you try to. Until then, I intend to enjoy every last moment of my son's wedding. Besides, 'tis apparent Adrienne has no idea what you're planning. I'm not so certain she won't side with me," she snipped pertly.

"Here she comes." Tavis interrupted their squabbling and waved their attention

to the stone stairs that cascaded into the upper bailey.

"Oh! Isn't she lovely?" Lydia breathed.

A collective sigh ruffled the night and blended with the fragrant breeze dappling the ridge.

"Could be a princess!"

"Nay, a queen!"

"Prettier than a fairy queen!" A wee lass with blond ringlets clapped her hands delightedly.

"The Lady of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea." A crofter doffed his cap and clasped it over his heart in a gesture of fealty.

Lydia's smile faded as she watched Adrienne head for the stables.

No one spoke until she reappeared a few moments later, leading a horse to a nearby wall. "But what? What is that... a horse? Ah, I suppose she's riding a horse up," Lydia murmured, perplexed.

"A horse? Why wouldn't she just walk? 'Tis fair short space to cross, I'll say," Tavis wondered.

Beneath the brilliant moon they could clearly see her stepping up on a low stone wall and mounting a horse—wedding dress and all.

Hawk's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. His body tensed and he stifled an oath when he saw Rushka, who had been standing silently beside them, trace a gesture upon the air. "What are you *doing*!" Hawk growled, closing his hand around the Rom's arm.

Rushka stopped and his brown eyes rested on the Hawk with deep affection and deeper sorrow. "We had hoped he wouldn't come, my friend. We took all the precautions... the rowan crosses. The runes. I did everything I could to prevent it."

"Who wouldn't come? What are you talking about? Prevent what?" Hawk gritted. Every inch of his body was suddenly alive. All day something had been

gnawing at him, demanding that he take action, and now it exploded to a fever pitch in his blood. He'd like nothing more than to take action—but against what? What was happening? The thunder of approaching horses rumbled the earth behind him.

"He comes." Rushka tried to retrieve his arm from the Hawk's deadly grip, but dislodging a boulder from his chest might have been easier.

The clip-clop of horses' hooves canted up the ridge, drawing nearer.

"Talk to me," Hawk gritted, glaring down at Rushka. "*Now*."

"Hawk?" Lydia asked, worried.

"Hawk," Tavis warned.

"Hawk." His wife's husky voice cut through the night behind him.

The Hawk froze, his gaze locked on the elderly Rom who'd been like a father to him for so many years. A flicker in the man's eyes warned him not to turn. To just pretend nothing was happening. *Do not look at your wife*, Rushka's eyes were saying. He could see her, mirrored deep in the Rom's brown eyes. Not turn around? Impossible.

Hawk tugged his furious gaze from Rushka. He turned on one booted heel, slowly.

His wife. And next to her, upon the Hawk's own black charger, sat Adam. Hawk stood in silence, his hands fisted at his sides. The ridge was eerily still, not one child peeped, not one crofter breathed so much as a whisper or troubled murmur.

"Lorekeeper." Adam nodded a familiar acknowledgment to Rushka, and Hawk's gaze drifted between the strange smithy and his Rom friend. Rushka was white as new-fallen snow. His brown eyes were huge and deep, his lean body rigid. He did not return the greeting, but cast his eyes to the ground, signing those strange symbols furiously.

Adam laughed. "One would think you might have realized that it hasn't helped so far, old man. Give it up. Not even your... sacrifice... helped. Although it did mollify me slightly."

Lydia gasped. "What sacrifice?"

No one answered her.

"What sacrifice?" she repeated tersely. "Does he mean Esmerelda?" When no one responded, she shook Rushka by the arm. "Does he?" Her eyes flew back to Adam. "Who are you?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing like a mother bear's as she prepared to defend her cubs.

Rushka dragged her against him. "Be still, milady," he gritted. "Do not interfere in that which you don't understand."

"*Don't tell me what I—*" Lydia began heatedly, then shut her mouth beneath the Hawk's lethal gaze.

Hawk turned back to Adrienne and calmly raised his hands to help her dismount, as though nothing were amiss.

Adam laughed again, and it made Hawk's skin crawl. "She goes with me, Lord Buzzard."

"She stays with me. She is my wife. And it's Hawk. Lord *Hawk to you*."

"Nay. A vulture, a sad scavenger to pick over the unwanted remains, Lord Buzzard. She chooses was the deal made, do you recall? I saved your wife for a price. The price is now paid. You've lost."

"Nay." The Hawk shook his head slowly. "She chose already, and'twas me she chose."

"It would appear she *unchose* you," Adam mocked.

"Get off my horse, smithy. Now."

"Hawk!" Rushka warned, low and worried.

"Hawk." It was Adrienne's voice that stilled him. Froze him in mid-step toward the smithy. Until now, the Hawk had been focusing his attention and anger on the smithy. And he knew why. It was the same reason he had delayed turning around when he heard the horses approaching. The reason why he'd looked at Rushka instead. He was afraid to look at his wife, of what he might see in her

lovely eyes. Might she truly have unchosen him? Could he have been so completely wrong? He paused, hand on his sword hilt, and forced his eyes to hers. The insecurity that had seized him the very first day he'd found his wife at the smithy's forge reclaimed him with a vengeance.

Her face was smooth and void of emotion. "He speaks the truth. I have chosen him."

Hawk gaped at her, stunned. Not so much as a flicker of emotion in her silver eyes. "How is he making you lie, lass?" Hawk refused to believe her words, clinging to his faith in her. "What is he threatening you with, my heart?"

"Nothing," Adrienne said coldly, "and stop calling me that! I have never been your heart. I told you that from the beginning. I don't want you. It was Adam all along."

Hawk searched her face. Cool, composed, she sat the mare like a queen. Regal and untouchable. "And just what the hell was Uster, then?" he growled.

She shrugged, her hands palms up. "A vacation?" she replied flippantly.

Hawk tensed, his jaw gritting. "Then just what were the stables this afternoon—"

"A mistake," Adam cut him off flatly. "One she won't be repeating."

Hawk's gaze never wavered from Adrienne's. "Was it a mistake?" he asked softly.

Adrienne inclined her head. A pause the length of a heartbeat. "Yes."

The Hawk saw not so much as a flicker in her face. "What game play you, lass?" he breathed, danger emanating from every inch of his rigid stance, charging the air around them.

The night hung still and heavy. On the ridge not one person moved, riveted to the terrible scene unfolding.

"No game, Hawk. It's over between us. Sorry." Another nonchalant shrug.

"Adrienne, stop jesting—" he growled.

"'Tis no jest," she interrupted him with sudden anger. "The only joke here is on you! You didn't really think I could stay here, did you? I mean, come on!" She waved a hand dismissively at the splendor of the wedding feast. "I'm from the twentieth century, you fool. I'm used to luxuries. It's the little things that spoil. Coffee. Steaming showers, limousines, and all the glitter and hubbub. This was a lovely diversion—quite a little getaway with some of the most *fascinating* men..." She smiled at Adam, and it took every ounce of the Hawk's will not to leap at the smithy and choke the life from his arrogant body.

Instead, he stood like a marble effigy, hands curled at his side. "You were a virgin—"

"So? You taught me pleasure. But the smithy gave me more. It's that simple." Adrienne fiddled with the reins of her mount.

"Nay!" Hawk roared. "'Tis some game! What have you threatened my wife with, smithy?"

But it was Adrienne who answered, in that same calm, utterly detached voice. That husky voice that made him think he'd gone mad, for the words tumbling forth must surely be lies. Yet she didn't look as if she was being forced. There was no sword to her throat. No shimmer of tears in her eyes. And her voice, ah... it was level and calm. "He has threatened me only with greater pleasure than you ever gave me. He has true magic at his command. Don't waste your time hunting for us. You won't find us. He has promised to take me to places I've never dreamed existed." Adrienne nudged her mount closer to the smithy's.

Adam flashed a blinding smile at the Hawk. "Looks like you lost after all, pretty bird."

"Nay!" Hawk roared, lunging for the smithy and drawing his sword in one fluid sweep. The charger bucked at the Hawk's bellow and sidestepped wildly.

Rushka grabbed the Hawk's arm and cleaved his blow down so hard that the sword lodged in the earth at his feet.

Adam raised his hand.

"Nay!" Adrienne quickly restrained the smithy's hand. "You will not hurt him! No bloodshed. You prom—it's messy," she appended. "I don't like blood. It

makes me ill."

Adam cocked his head and lowered his hand. "Your wish is my command, Beauty."

"Is this truly what you wish, lass?" Hawk's eyes were black and soulless.

"Yes," she said softly. Carefully.

"He is not forcing you?" *Tell me, just say the word, wife, and I will kill him with my bare hands.*

She shook her head and met his gaze levelly.

"Say it," Hawk gritted. "He's not forcing you?"

"He uses... no coercion against... me."

"Do you... love... him?" He hated himself when his voice broke roughly over the words. His throat was so tight he could scarcely breathe.

"I love him the way I loved Eberhard," she sighed. She smiled vapidly at Adam, who suddenly narrowed his eyes at her last words.

"Enough, Beauty." Adam captured her hand in his. "The universe awaits us and your pleasure is my command."

Hawk's heart wrenched and twisted. The damned Ever-hard. Her first love, whether he'd ever made love to her or not. He turned away before he could make a bloody massacre of the ridge singlehandedly.

When he finally returned his gaze to her, it was too late—she was gone.

The mass of hundreds on the ridge at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea stood numbly as both horses and riders simply vanished into the night air. One moment they were there. The next—nothing.

But a soft voice floated on the breeze. *You were right about your falcons, Sidheach*, came the strange last words of the woman he'd loved and who had effectively destroyed the once proud laird of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea.

Lydia clutched at his sleeve limply.

Rushka cursed harshly in a language no one had ever heard before.

Hawk only stared blindly into the night.



CHAPTER 30

"WHERE ARE WE?" ADRIENNE ASKED ADAM WOODENLY.

He was leading her mount by the reins down a dark path through a strange forest. Twisted branches wove a gnarled canopy above her head. Occasionally a ray of faint light would pierce the dense gloom and the creaking branches would glimmer like bleached bones.

No crickets. No normal noises, only the screech of flying creatures. The bracken rustled, revealing brief glimpses of dwarfed gnomes with wild faces. She shivered violently and hugged her arms around herself.

"You are in my realm."

"Who are you *really*, Adam Black?" Her voice broke on the simple sentence, raw and full of anguish.

For an answer, she received a mocking smile. Nothing more.

"Tell me," she demanded dully. But the dark man at her side rode in silence.

"At least tell me *why*."

"Why what?" He cocked a curious brow at her.

"Why did you do this to me? What did I do? Why did you send me back in time and take me away again?" *And break my heart and leave me dying inside?*

Adam stopped their mounts, amusement lighting his dark visage. He reached out a hand to stroke her pale cheek and she shuddered beneath his hand. "Oh, Beauty, is that what you think? How very self-engrossed and utterly charming you are." His laughter rolled. But it was his next words that shafted through her soul like a knife. "It had nothing to do with you, my winsome beauty. Any beautiful woman would have sufficed. But I thought you hated beautiful men. I heard you, there in your library, swearing off men, all men. Yet, it would seem I was mistaken. Or you lied, which is more likely."

"What are you saying?" she breathed faintly. Any woman would have sufficed?

Her heart was laid bare and cleaved through by this man's twisted game, and he dared say so baldly that it hadn't mattered one whit who she was? A pawn? Again? Her jaw locked temporarily. *I will not scream. I will not.* When she was certain she could speak without raging she said coolly, "You got what you wanted. Why won't you just tell me who you are?" She had to find out more about this man to avenge herself. To avenge her husband.

"True. I did get what I wanted. The Hawk looked utterly destroyed, wouldn't you say? Crushed." Adam flicked his hand lightly over hers. "You did very well tonight, Beauty. But tell me"—his eyes searched hers intently, and she stiffened when it seemed they might penetrate into her very soul—"what did you mean about his falcons?"

Adrienne's breath hitched. "He told me once that all his falcons had flown him," she lied evenly. "You told me I had to be utterly convincing or you would kill him, so I chose that reminder to drive the point home. That's all."

"That had better be all." His face was cold and unforgiving. Just as it had been in the broch before the Hawk had come looking for her. Before what should have been the wedding of her dreams. Icily, he'd explained to her in exact and excruciating detail precisely how he would destroy the Hawk and everyone at Dalkeith if she failed his will. Then he'd shown her things he could do. Things her mind still couldn't quite comprehend. But she'd understood that he was perfectly capable of carrying out the mass destruction he'd threatened. Two choices he'd given her—either lie to the Hawk and break his heart, not to mention her own, or stand by while Adam used his unnatural powers to kill him. Then Lydia. Followed by every man, woman, and child at Dalkeith.

No, there had been no choice at all. The hellish decision had given her an intimate understanding of what a man called the king's whore might once have suffered.

When she'd left the broch shaking and pale, she'd seized one last moment of glory. She'd made love to the Hawk with all the passion in her soul. Saying goodbye, and dying inside. She'd known it would be horrible to lie to him, but she hadn't anticipated just how deeply it would cut her.

Adam had been unyielding on that point. He'd made it clear that she must fully convince the Hawk she desired Adam. After the incredible intimacy she and

Hawk had shared, she'd known she would have to say hateful, horrid things to convince him.

She shivered violently as Adam's thumb brushed her lower lip. She slapped his hand away in spite of her fear. "Don't touch me."

"If I thought for a moment you had tried to tell him something more, I would go back and kill him even as we speak, Beauty."

"I gave you what you wanted, you bastard!" Adrienne cried. "All of Dalkeith is safe from you now."

"It doesn't matter." Adam shrugged indolently. "He's dead anyway." Adam tugged at her reins and resumed their slow passage beneath the rustling limbs.

"What?" Adrienne hissed.

Adam smiled puckishly. "I thought you might enjoy the scenic route back. This trail is a timeline and we just passed the year 1857. It's that misty bend back there between the... trees... for lack of a better word. He's been dead for over three hundred years.

A silent scream began to build inside her. "Who *are* you?"

"They used to call us gods," he said dispassionately. "*You* would do well to worship me."

"I'll see you in hell, first," she breathed.

"Not possible, Beauty. We don't die."

CHAPTER 31

SEATTLE

NOVEMBER 1997

ADRIENNE DREW HER ARM BACK AND WINGER THE BOOK like a Frisbee. It was supposed to fly across the room and crash with a resounding thump against the wall. Instead, it dropped limply, landing on the floor at the foot of her bed.

She glanced at the volume in disgust and noticed that it had fallen open to a page. She squinted to read it from her perch at the footrail.

Dreams about stopped-up commodes can symbolize many things: the dreamer is emotionally repressed. Emotional and/or physical purging is recommended. A recurring dream of this nature signifies the dreamer has endured a traumatic experience from which he/she *must* find some kind of release or serious psychological damage may occur.

So much for a sign from heaven.

Adrienne swallowed a choked laugh that turned into a sob. *Who writes this stuff?*

She dangled her bare foot over the bed and poked the book shut with her toe. *1001 Little Dreams*. How bizarre. She hadn't even realized she had that book in her library. Even more bizarre that she'd been dreaming about toilets for ten nights in a row. Nothing else. Just backed-up, overflowing commodes.

Lovely.

But she didn't have to be hit over the head with a dream guide. She knew what was wrong with her. Fifteen days ago she had materialized in her sprawling Victorian house at 93 Coattail Lane, Seattle, U.S. of A.

And she hadn't spoken to a single soul since then. Every scrap of energy she had went toward maintaining her composure—her tight skin. Tight dry eyes. Tight little death going on inside. She understood perfectly well that if she let even one tiny tear sneak out of the dry corner of her eye, she couldn't be held responsible for the flooding that could cause mass evacuations throughout the state.

She scratched her tight scalp with a tight little hand as she tightly petted Moonie's silky back. She touched Moonie's pink nose in a tight, economical motion. *No stopped-up commodes in a cat's world*, Adrienne mused as Moonie curled her paws into her hair and began a thrumming little purr.

It was Moonie's hungry mews that roused her from the bed. Adrienne eased her aching body from the down coverlets and padded slowly to the kitchen.

God, but she felt five hundred years old herself, in pain from head to toe from a heartache she knew would never heal.

Adrienne woodenly opened a can of tuna. White albacore. Only the best for Moonie. She slumped down on the floor and brushed irritably at the hand that shoved a book in front of her. "Go away, Marie, I need to be alone." Adrienne marveled at the pale swirls of lime in the jade tile of the kitchen floor, and wondered why she'd never noticed them before. She rubbed lightly at one of the swirls. Slate tile could be so interesting. Riveting, in fact.

"Eees book you dropped," Marie said in her thick accent.

Adrienne didn't move. The book brushed her cheek. Heavens, but the woman was insistent. The book's sharp corner poked the soft underside of her neck. Probably another stupid dream book. Well, she just wouldn't look at it.

"Quit shoving at me." Adrienne took the book blindly, her eyes squeezed shut. "Go away now," she mumbled. There. That wasn't too bad. She applauded herself for performing a simple function with precision. No tears. Not one thought of... the thing she wasn't thinking of. Adrienne took a deep breath and forced a grim, tight smile.

She was going to be fine. Small things now—big things soon.

"I think I make for you some tea," Marie said.

Adrienne's stomach heaved and rolled. "No."

"I think, then, I make dinner for *senorita*."

"I'm not hungry. Go away."

"Okay. I move things to garage," Marie grunted.

Move things? Leave the house? "No!" Adrienne controlled her voice with a tremendous effort. "I mean, that's not necessary, Marie. God knows this old house is big enough for both of us."

"Eees no good. I no good to you. I move now back to garage." Marie watched her carefully.

Adrienne sighed. Marie simply *had* to stay in the house.

She couldn't stand the huge, aching silence, the empty rooms. The hum of the refrigerator might drive her mad.

"Marie, I don't want you to move back out. I really want you to stay with..." Adrienne opened her eyes, her voice trailing off as she stared in horror at the book in her hands. *A Study of Medieval Falconry*.

Stay tight!

Would you soar for me, falcon? I'll take you higher than you've ever been. I'll teach you to bank heights you only dreamed existed.

He'd certainly made good on that promise. And now she was falling from those incredible heights without a parachute, or a Mary Poppins umbrella, or anything else to break her fall. Adrienne de Simone Douglas squeezed her arms around her stomach and started screaming.

The tiny Cuban woman dropped to her knees and very carefully pulled Adrienne into her arms. Then she rocked her, smoothed her hair, and did her best to comfort her.

For days and days Adrienne lay on her back replaying every precious memory on the blank screen of her ceiling. She'd pulled the drapes shut and turned all the lights out. She couldn't stand the world to be bright without him.

Marie floated in and out, bringing food and drink that remained untouched, and Moonie stayed at her side unceasingly.

Adrienne just drifted in and out of consciousness, as the mind does when grief runs too deep to handle. Eventually she came back to herself, but she went the long way around.

* * * * *

On the glistening silica sands of Morar, Adam Black sauntered with arrogant grace to his Queen's side.

"Where have you been wandering, minstrel-mine?"

Queen Aoibheal asked silkily. "What new tales and entertainments have you collected for me?"

"Oh, the finest of tales! An epic, grand adventure," Adam bragged, drawing the elegant courtiers near.

The Fae loved a good tale, the thicker the subterfuge, the more intense the passions, the more aroused the court. They'd long since tired of happy endings; immune to suffering themselves, they were enamored with mortal struggles and casualties. The Queen herself was most especially partial to a tragicomedy of errors, and this new tale did suit that genre well.

"Tell us, jester, sing and play for us!" the court of the Tuatha De Danaan cried.

Adam's smile gleamed brightly. He met his Queen's eye and held it long. "Once upon a time there was a mortal man. A man so fair even the Fae Queen herself had noticed him..."

The Queen's eyes glittered brightly as she listened, at first in amusement, after a time with obvious agitation, and finally with a sensation that vaguely resembled remorse.

CHAPTER 32

LYDIA SIGHED AS SHE PICKED THROUGH HER SEEDS. THE NEW YEAR had inched past them as if it traveled on the humped back of a snail. She didn't even want to recall the grim scene Christmas had been. Winter had descended upon Dalkeith in force—icicles twisted obscenely from the shutters, and the dratted door to the front steps had been frozen shut this morning, effectively sealing her in her own home.

Lydia could remember a time when she'd loved the winter. When she'd reveled in each season and the unique pleasures it brought. Christmas had once been her favorite holiday. But now... she missed Adrian and Ilyse. *Come home, children. I need you*, she prayed silently.

The sound of splintering wood suddenly rent the air, causing her to jerk her head up in an involuntary gesture that sent her precious seeds flying.

Damned inconsiderate of them to split firewood right outside the window.

Lydia pushed irritably at her hair and began to reorganize the scattered seeds. She dreamed of the flowers she would plant—if spring ever came again.

Another resounding crash shuddered through the Greathall. She stifled a very unladylike oath and laid her seeds aside. "Keep it down out there! A body's trying to do a bit of thinking!" she yelled.

Still the deafening crashes continued. "We aren't all that short of firewood, lads!" Lydia roared at the frozen door.

Her words were met with a terrible screeching noise.

"That's it. That's *it*!" She leapt up from her chair and seethed. That last one had seemed to come from... upstairs?

She cocked her head at an angle.

Someone had either decided it was too cold to split firewood outside or was quite busily turning the furniture into kindling instead.

The crash was followed by the shattering of glass. "*Holy shit!*" Lydia muttered, as her lovely daughter-in-law would have offered quite perkily. She spun on her heel, grabbed up her skirts, and raced the stairs like a lass of twenty. Hand on her heart she flew down the corridor, skidding past gawking maids and tense soldiers. How many people had stood about listening to this insane destruction while she'd been sitting downstairs?

Not the nursery, she prayed, anything but that.

Her son would never destroy that room of dreams. Granted, he'd been a bit out of sorts, but still... No. He definitely would not do something so terrible. Not her son.

By all that's holy, oh yes he would. And he was.

Her breath came in burning gasps as she stared, dumbfounded. Her son stood in the nursery surrounded by a twisted heap of horrid broken wooden limbs. He'd been literally ripping apart the lovingly crafted furnishings. He was clad in only a kilt, his upper body glistening with sweat. The veins in his arms were swollen and his hands were raw and bloody. His raven hair was loose but for the two war braids at either temple. *By the sweet saints, just paint his face blue and I wouldn't even know him for my son!* Lydia thought.

The Hawk stood silently, wild-eyed. There was a smudge of blood on his face where he'd wiped at sweat. Lydia watched, frozen in horror, as he tilted an oil bowl, drizzling its contents over the splinters of furniture, the toys and books, the magnificent dollhouse that had been squashed flat in his gargantuan rage.

When he dropped the candle, a soft scream wrenched her mouth wide.

The flames leapt up, greedily devouring the pile of Hawk's and Lydia's shattered dreams. Shaking with hurt and fury, Lydia pressed a hand to her mouth and swallowed a sob. She turned away before the animal that used to be her son could see her tears.

* * * * *

"We have to do something," Lydia murmured woodenly, staring blankly at the kitchen hearth.

Tavis stepped close behind her, his hands suspended in the air just above her

waist. He dropped his head forward and inhaled deeply of her scent. "I'll speak with him, Lydia—"

"He won't listen," she choked as she spun around. "I've tried. Dear God, we've all tried. He's like some rabid dog, snarling and foaming and oh, Tavis! My nursery! My grandbabies!"

"I haven't tried yet," Tavis said calmly, dropping his hands to grip her waist.

Lydia cocked her head, marveling at the implicit authority in his words. He'd managed to surprise her once again, this gentle man who'd stood patiently by her side for so long.

"You'll speak with him?" she echoed hopefully, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears.

"Aye," he assured her.

Strength and ability laced his reply. How could it have taken her so long to begin to see this man clearly?

Some of her astonishment must have been evident in her gaze, because he gave her that patient smile and said tenderly, "I knew one day you'd finally open your eyes, Lydia. I also knew it would be worth every minute of the wait," he added quietly.

Lydia swallowed hard as a fission of heat and hope and heady, tumultuous love spread through her in a wave. Love. How long had she been in love with this man? she wondered dumbly.

Tavis brushed her lips with his, a light friction that promised so much more. "Doona worry. I care for him like my own, Lydia. And, as if he were my own, 'tis time we had a good thorough father-son kind of talk."

"But what if he refuses to listen?" she fretted.

Tavis smiled. "He'll listen. You can take Tavis MacTarvitt's word on that, I'll say."

* * * * *

The Hawk brooded into the fire, watching ghosts dance whitely in the spaces

between the flames. They were memory-born and hell-bound, as he surely was. But purgatory—if not heaven—was within his reach, tidily captured in a bottle, and so he toasted the ghosts as he raced them to oblivion.

He picked up another bottle of whisky and turned it in his hand, studying its rich amber color with drunken appreciation. He raised the bottle to his lips, his hand fisted about the neck, and bit out the stopper. Briefly he remembered biting out the stopper of a Gypsy potion. Remembered covering his wife's body with his own and tasting, touching, kissing... He'd been fool enough then to believe in love.

Bah! Adam! It had always been him. From the first day he'd seen her. She'd been standing pressed against a tree trunk watching the blasted smithy with hunger in her eyes. He tossed back a swallow of whisky and considered going back to court. Back to King James.

A crooked, bitter smile curved his lip. Even as he pictured himself prowling the boudoirs of Edinburgh again, another part of his mind recalled the roiling thick steam rising from a scented bath, the sheen of oil upon her skin as she'd tossed her head back, baring the lovely column of her throat to his teeth. Baring everything to him, or so he'd thought.

Adrienne... Treacherous, traitorous, lying unfaithful bitch.

"Lay me into the dead earth now and be done with it," he muttered to the fire. He didn't even react when the door to the study was flung open so hard that it hit the wall. "Close the door, man. A bit of a draft chilling my bones, there is," the Hawk slurred unsteadily without even bothering to see who had invaded the drunken squalor of his private hell. He again tilted the bottle to his mouth and took a long swallow.

Tavis crossed the room in three purposeful strides and smashed the bottle out of Hawk's hand with such force that it shattered in a splash of glass and whisky on the smooth stones of the hearth. He gazed at Tavis a befuddled moment, then reached, undeterred, for a second bottle.

Tavis stepped between the Hawk and the crated liquor.

"Get out of my way, old man," Hawk growled, tensing to rise. He had barely

gained his feet when Tavis's fist connected solidly with his jaw, spilling him back into the chair.

Hawk wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and glared up at Tavis. "Why'd you go and do that for, Tavis MacTarvitt?" he grumbled, making no move to defend himself.

"I don't give a bloody hell what you do to yourself, *laird*" Tavis sneered. "Just get the hell out of this castle and don't do it in front of your mother."

"Who the hell d'you think you are?"

"I know who I am! I'm the man who watched you grow from wee lad to braw laird. I'm the man who burst with pride while he watched you make some hard choices." Tavis's voice dropped a harsh notch, "Aye, I'm just the man who has loved you since the day you drew your first hungry breath in this world. And now I'm the man who's going to thrash you within an inch of your worthless life if you don't get a grip on yourself."

Hawk gaped, then swiped irritably at Tavis. "Go 'way." He closed his eyes wearily.

"Oh, I'm not done yet, my boy," Tavis said through gritted teeth. "You are not fit to be laird of a dunghill. 'Tis obvious you have no intention of pulling yourself together, so until you do you can just get the bleeding hell out of Lydia's castle. Now! I'll send word to Adrian and bring him home. He'll make a fine laird—"

The Hawk's eyes flew open. "Over my dead body," he snarled.

"Fine. So be it," Tavis spit back. "You're no use to any one as you are now anyway. You may as well fall on your own claymore for all the good you're doing your people!"

"I am laird here!" Hawk slurred, his eyes flashing furiously. "And you... you, old man, oh hell, you're fired." Although he had intended—when he'd still had his wife—to relinquish his place to Adrian, it was currently damned cold outside and he wasn't going anywhere just yet. Maybe in the spring, if he hadn't drowned himself in whisky yet.

Tavis yanked Hawk to his feet in a swift motion, surprising the drunken laird.

"Pretty strong for an old man," Hawk muttered. Tavis pulled the stumbling Hawk to the doors of the study.

"Get off me!" the Hawk bellowed.

"I expected more from you, lad. A fool I must be, but I thought you were the kind of man who fought for what he wanted. But no, you just fell apart in the face of a wee bit of adversity—

"Och, and my wife leavin' me for another man is only a wee bit of adversity? That's what you call it?" Hawk slurred thickly, his burr deepening with his anger.

"Regardless of how *you* perceive what happened, you still have a family here, and a clan who needs its laird. If you can't do the job, then step aside for someone who can!"

"Who the hell put you in charge of me?" Hawk roared.

Tavis's own burr thickened as his temper mounted. "Your mother, you bletherin' idiot! And even if she hadna asked me, I would have come after you myself! You may be killing yourself, lad, but I'll no' be having you torturing Lydia while you're doing it!"

"All I'm doing, old man, is having a wee bit of a drink," Hawk protested.

"You've been having a 'wee bit of a drink' for over a month now. I, for one, am tired of watching you guzzle yourself to death. If you canna put down the bottle, then just get the hell out. Go piss the night away in a snowdrift where the people who love you are no' forced to watch."

Tavis kicked open the doors and tossed the stumbling Hawk face-first into the snow.

"And doona be coming back in until you can be nice to your mother! When you're ready to be laird again, *and* you've given up the bottle, you can return. But not until then!" Tavis roared as the Hawk struggled to pull his head out of a drift.

When Hawk finally managed to struggle upright, he snorted disbelievingly when he saw the man he'd thought of as a mild-mannered tanner send the Hawk's own guards to stand wide-legged in front of the door, crossed arms clearly barring

him entrance into his own castle.

"Just stay out!" Tavis bellowed with such volume that Hawk heard him through the castle's heavy wooden doors.

* * * * *

Adrienne hadn't realized how thoroughly she hated winter.

The pale face of the clock above the mantel chimed once, twice, then lapsed into silence. Two o'clock in the morning; a time when being awake could make a person feel like the only living creature left in the world. And Adrienne did feel that way, until Marie silently entered the library. Adrienne glanced up and opened her mouth to say good night, but instead a deluge of words flooded out despite the dam she'd so painstakingly erected.

Marie tucked herself into an armchair and smoothed an afghan across her lap.

Adrienne poked at the fire and opened a bottle of sweet port while she told Marie a story she'd never told anyone. The story of the orphan girl who thought she'd fallen in love with a prince, only to discover that Eberhard Darrow Garrett had been a prince of organized crime and that he'd been sending her on vacations to get drugs across the border in her luggage, her car, sewn into her clothing. And how, since she had always been packed and unpacked by his attendants, she hadn't known. She'd simply enjoyed wearing his incredible ten-carat diamond engagement ring, riding in his limos, and thumbing her nose at the Franciscan nuns in the old orphanage on First Street. How she hadn't known that the FBI had been drawing its net around him ever tighter. She'd seen that a wealthy, undeniably attractive man was showering her with love, or so she'd thought at the time. She'd had no idea she was a last-ditch effort to get a series of shipments out of the country. She'd never suspected that she was less than nothing to him—a beautiful, innocent young woman no one would ever suspect. His perfect pigeon.

Until the day she'd overheard a terrible conversation she'd never been meant to hear.

She told Marie in a hushed voice how she'd turned state's evidence and bought her own freedom. And then how Eberhard, whom the FBI had managed to miss after all, had come after her in earnest.

Marie sipped her port and listened.

She told Marie how when she'd finally been trapped by him in an old abandoned warehouse, sick of running and hiding and being afraid, she'd done the only thing she could do when he'd raised his gun.

She'd killed him before he could kill her.

* * * * *

At that point Marie waved an impatient hand. "Ees not real story. Why you tell me this?" she asked, accusingly.

Adrienne blinked. She'd just told the woman what she'd been afraid to tell anyone. That she'd killed a man. She'd done it in self-defense, granted, but she'd killed a man. She told Marie things she'd never trusted to anyone before, and the woman waved it away. Pretty much accused her of wasting her time. "What do you mean, Marie? It was real," she said defensively. "It happened. I was there."

Marie rummaged through her small reticule of English to find the right words. "Yes yes, *senorita*. May be ees real, but ees not important. Ees over and forgotten. And ees not why you weep like world ees ending. Tell me real story. Who cares where you come from, or I? Today matters. Yesterday ees skin on a snake, to be shed many times."

Adrienne sat very still for a long moment as a chill worked its way down her spine and into her belly. The hall clock chimed the quarter hour and Adrienne gazed at Marie with new appreciation.

Drawing a deep breath, Adrienne told her of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea. Of Lydia. And of Sidheach. Marie's brown eyes lit with a sparkle, and Adrienne was treated to a rare sight she'd bet few people had ever seen. The tiny olive-skinned woman laughed and clapped her small hands to hear of her love and of her time with the Hawk. She latched on to details, oohing over the nursery, glaring at her for saying Adam's name too many times, ahing over their time together in Uster, sighing over the wedding that should have been.

"Ah... finally... this ees *real* story." Marie nodded.

* * * * *

In 1514, the Hawk was trying desperately to sleep. He'd heard a man could

freeze to death if he fell asleep in the snow. But either it was too damned cold in that drift or he wasn't quite drunk enough. He could remedy that. Shivering, he pulled his tartan closer against the bitter, howling wind. Stumbling to his feet, he teetered unevenly up the exterior stairs to the rooftop, knowing the guards often kept a few bottles up there to keep them warm while they stood watch.

No such luck. No bottles and no guards. How could he have forgotten? The guards were all *inside*, where it was warm. He was the only one *outside*. He kicked aimlessly at the snow on the roof, then stiffened when a shadow shifted, black against the gleaming snow. He squinted and peered through the wet swirling flakes. "What the hell are you doing up here, Grimm?"

Grimm reluctantly abandoned his persistent survey of the falling dusk. He was about to explain when he saw the Hawk's face and kept his silence instead.

"I said, what are you doing up here, Grimm? They tell me you practically live on my roof now."

Suddenly furious, Grimm retorted, "Well, they tell me you practically live in a bottle of whisky now!"

Hawk stiffened and rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Don't yell at me, you son of a bitch! You're the one who lied to me about my—" He couldn't say the word. Couldn't even think it. His wife, about whom Grimm had been right. His wife, who had left him for Adam.

"You are so unbelievably dense you can't even see the truth when it's right in front of you, can you?" Grimm snapped.

The Hawk swayed drunkenly, God, where had he heard those words before? Why did they make his heart lurch inside his chest? "What are you doing up here, Grimm?" he repeated stubbornly, clutching at the parapet to steady himself.

"Waiting for a blasted falling star so I can wish her back, you drunken fool."

"I don't want her back," Hawk snarled.

Grimm snorted. "I may have mucked it up once, but I'm not the only one who let his emotions interfere. If you would just get past your foolish pride and anger, you'd realize that the lass would never have left you willingly for that blasted

smithy!"

Hawk flinched and rubbed his face. "What say you, man?"

Grimm shrugged and turned away, his dark eyes searching the sky intently. "When I thought she was breaking your heart, I tried to keep the two of you apart. 'Twas a damn fool thing for me to do, I know that now, but I did what I thought was best at the time. How the hell was I supposed to know you two were falling in love? I've had no such experience. It seemed like a bloody battle to me! But now, thinking back on it, I'm fair certain she loved you from the very beginning. Would that we all could see forward with such clarity. If you'd pull your head out of that bottle and your own stubborn ass long enough, you might develop keen vision as well."

"She-said-she-loved-the-smithy," Hawk spit each word out carefully.

"She said, if you'll recall, that she loved him like Ever-hard. Tell me Hawk, how did she love her Ever-hard?"

"I don't know," Hawk snarled.

"Try to imagine. You told me yourself that he broke her heart. That she talked of him while you held her—

"Shut up, Grimm!" the Hawk roared as he stalked away.

* * * * *

Hawk wandered the snow-covered gardens with his hands pressed over his ears to stem the flood of voices. He removed his hands from his ears only long enough to take another swig from the bottle he'd pilfered from the stable boy. But oblivion never came and the voices didn't stop—they just grew louder and clearer.

I love you, Sidheach. Trust you, with all my heart and further then.

None of my falcons have ever flown my hand without returning, he had warned her at the beginning of that magic summer.

You were right about your falcons, Sidheach, she'd said when she left with Adam. He'd wondered many a night why she'd said those words; they'd made no

sense to him at all. But now a hint of understanding penetrated his stupor.

Right about his falcons...

Had his own jealousy and insecurity about the smithy so muddled his vision?

None of my falcons have flown my hand...

Hawk lurched to his feet as a terrible thought occurred to him.

The day of their wedding she'd been gone from his side for more than two hours. He hadn't been able to find her. Then she'd walked hurriedly out of the broch. He'd wanted to take her back into the sweet coolness to make love to her and she'd carefully and determinedly steered him away. They'd gone to the stable instead.

What had she been doing in the broch on their wedding day?

He sped through the frosty garden and leapt the low stone wall, racing through the lower bailey. He threw open the door of the broch and stood, gasping great breaths into his lungs. It was too dark with night falling. He went back outside and drew open the shutters. Not much light, but maybe it would be enough.

Hawk stood in the center of the round tower, memories tumbling around him. Eventually his eyes adjusted to the gloom. *What were you trying to tell me, lass?*

His mind whirled while his eyes searched the floor, the ceiling, the walls...

There.

He crossed to the wall by the door and there it was in tiny letters. Printed on the dark wall with chalky white limestone.

None of your falcons have flown you willingly, my love. Always yours! A.D.S.D.

A tiny leak sprang in the dam that had held back his anguish, releasing a trickle of pain that went on and on. She'd tried to tell him. *He uses no coercion against me*, she'd said. But coercion the smithy had obviously used against someone or something that Adrienne cared about more than she'd cared for her own happiness.

How could he have not figured it out before? That his cherished wife would have sacrificed everything to keep Dalkeith safe, just as he would. That hers was a love so deep, so unselfish, she would have walked through hell and back again to protect what she loved.

Hawk groaned aloud as memories tumbled through his mind. Adrienne bathing with him in a cool spring on their return from Uster, and the simple reverence in her eyes as she surveyed the untamed landscape that was Scotia. Adrienne's eyes glowing every time she gazed up at Dalkeith's stone walls. Adrienne's tenderness and gentle heart hidden carefully behind her aloof facade.

The bastard smithy must have found her in the broch, or perhaps he'd been trailing her. Adam had obviously threatened to use his strange powers to destroy Dalkeith, and Adrienne had done whatever he'd asked to prevent that. Or was it he, the Hawk, Adam had threatened to destroy? That thought sent him into an even bleaker rage. So, his wife had given herself up to protect him and left him a loving message to let him know what she couldn't risk telling him. That she would always love him. Her strange words had been carefully selected to make him wonder why she'd said them. To make him go to the falcon broch and look around. She hadn't been able to risk being any more explicit for fear Adam would catch on.

She must have written the words only moments before he'd found her the day of the wedding. Knowing that she had to leave him to keep him safe, she had wanted one last thing—for him to hold fast to his belief in her.

But he hadn't. He'd raged like a wounded animal, quickly believing the worst.

He swallowed the bitter bile of shame. She'd never stopped loving him. She'd never left him willingly. Small comfort now.

How could he ever have doubted her for even a minute?

The bottle dropped from his hands with a thump. Sidheach James Lyon Douglas, most beautiful man and renowned lover of three continents, man the very Fae might have envied, sank to the ground and sat very still. So still that the tears almost froze on his cheeks before slipping to the ground.

* * * * *

Hours later, Hawk made the slow, sober journey back up to the rooftop and sat heavily beside Grimm. As if their earlier conversation had never been interrupted he said, "Ever-hard... She said he used her for a fool, and she cried."

Grimm looked at his best friend and almost shouted with relief. The wild black eyes were mostly sane again. The jagged, brittle pieces of his heart no longer dangled from his sleeve. There was just a glimmer of the old Hawk's determination and strength in his face, but a glimmer was a good start. "Hawk, my friend, there is not a man, woman, or child at Dalkeith who believes she left you willingly. Either I can stay up here and freeze my ladycrackers of trying to find a falling star, or you can do something about it yourself. I—and my freezing nether regions—would thank you most assuredly. As would all of Dalkeith. *Do* something, man."

Hawk closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Like what? You saw them vanish into thin air. I don't even know where to look."

Grimm pointed to the smoky crest of Brahir Mount in silence, and the Hawk nodded slowly.

"Aye. The Rom."

Grimm and the Hawk passed a moment staring silently into the swirling gray mists.

"Hawk?"

"Hmmm?"

"We'll get her back," Grimm promised.

CHAPTER 33

IT TOOK MORE THAN A MONTH OF FRUSTRATED SEARCHING TO find the Rom. They'd moved on to warmer climes for the winter. It was Grimm who finally tracked them down and brought Rushka back to Dalkeith. Unknown to the Hawk, recovering Adrienne had become Grimm's personal penance, and finding the Rom had been but a minor step along the way.

"Who *is* Adam Black, really?" Hawk asked.

Everyone gathered in the Great Hall had wondered that same question at some point during the strange smithy's stay, and they all leaned closer to hear the answer.

"You Highlanders call his people the *daoine sith*. Adam is the fairy fool. The jester at the Fairy Queen's court." Rushka sighed and ran worried hands through his silver hair.

"Fairies," Grimm echoed carefully.

"Oh, don't go getting spooked on me, Grimm Roderick."

Rushka snapped. "*You* heard the banshee yourself the night your people were killed. You saw the *bean nighe*, the washerwoman, scrubbing the bloody gown of your mother before she died. Just makes me wonder what else you've witnessed of which you speak naught." Rushka broke off abruptly and shook his head. "But that's neither here nor there. The simple fact is that the Fairy inhabit these islands. They have since long before we came, and they probably will continue to do so long after we're gone."

"I've always believed," Lydia said softly.

Hawk shifted uneasily by the fire. He had been raised on legends of the Fairy, and the fairy fool—the *sin siriche du*—was the most dangerous of the lot. "Tell me how to beat him, Rushka. Tell me everything there is to know."

Keeping track of the past was an astonishing feat of memory, and not all of the Rom could maintain such exhaustive records in their heads. But Rushka was one of the finest lorekeepers, and he was revered for being able to recite the ancient

tales word for word—his father's words, and those of his father's father before him—back fifty generations.

"It was told to me as follows." Rushka took a deep breath and began.

"There are two ways to be certain one is safe from the Fae. One is to exact the Queen's oath upon the pact of the Tuatha De Danaan. That is nearly impossible to obtain for she rarely bothers herself with the doings of mortals. The other is to secure the true name of the fairy with whom one is dealing. One must then pronounce the name correctly, in the being's own tongue, while looking directly into the fairy's eyes, and issue one command. This command must be explicit and complete, for it will be obeyed precisely and only to the letter. There is no limit on the length of the command but that it must be spoken unbroken, conjoined, never-ending. One may pause, but one may never finish a sentence until the entire command is complete. If the command is broken to resume conversation with anyone, the extent of obedience summarily ends." Rushka paused a moment studying the fire. "So you see, our histories say that if you look directly into his eyes while calling his true name, he is yours to command." Rushka paced uneasily before the fire in the Greathall.

"What is his true name?"

Rushka smiled faintly and sketched several symbols in the ash of the hearth. "We do not speak it aloud. But he is the black one, the bringer of oblivion. He has many other names, but 'tis only this one that concerns you."

Hawk was incredulous. If he had only spoken Adam's name in Gaelic, he would have had it. "That simple, Rushka? You mean to tell me he was so smug and sure of himself that he called himself Adam Black?" *Amadan Dubh*. Hawk echoed the name in the privacy of his mind. Literally translated it meant Adam Black.

"Aye. But there's still a catch, Hawk. You have to find him first. He can only be compelled if he is present and you utter his name while looking directly into his eyes. And they say his eyes can send a man swiftly into madness."

"Been there already," Hawk murmured absently. "Why didn't you tell me this when he was still here? Before he took Adrienne back?"

Rushka shook his head. "Would you have believed me if I had told you that

Adam was of a mythical race? That we believed he had brought the lass here for some strange revenge? Lydia tells me you wouldn't even believe she was from the future until you finally saw her disappear yourself."

Hawk's eyes clouded and he rubbed his jaw impatiently. "There is that," he allowed finally, grudgingly. "But you could have warned—"

"I did, Hawk, remember? In as much as I could the day of Zeldie's burial."

The Hawk nodded soberly. True. And his mind had been so filled with thoughts of his wife that he had put his own desires before the warnings.

"Besides, even if I had thought you would have believed, I still probably wouldn't have told you. Compelling the Fairy is a last resort. 'Tis a dangerous thing. With the fool's true name you may compel him only once—and precisely to the letter of your law. The fool obeys only exactly what you say. Were you to say, "I command you to bring Adrienne back, he would have to bring her. But she might be dead because you didn't specify in what condition."

The Hawk threw his head back and let out a wail of frustration.

Rushka continued. "Or, if you were to say, 'Take me to her,' he would have to, but *you* might be dead. Or turned into a lizard if the thought appealed to him. 'Tis a very dangerous thing to try to compel the fairy fool."

The Hawk rubbed his clean-shaven face and brooded into the flames, listening intently as Rushka went on. He sorted through the flood of information, picking and choosing carefully. It could be done. Aye, it could. When Rushka finally fell still, they passed a time in silence unbroken but for the crackle of the hearth fire.

"If you choose to try it, we still have one small problem, my friend," Rushka warned.

"What's that?" the Hawk asked absently.

"He's gone. How will you find him? I've known men who searched for the legendary Fairy their entire lives, yet never saw so much as a stray kelpie, Hawk."

Hawk considered that a moment, then smiled. "Egotistical, you say he is?"

"Aye."

"Vain, obviously."

"Aye," Rushka confirmed.

"Prone to fits of anger and mischief was how I believe you put it."

"Aye."

"And it would appear he came here, goaded by such a human thing as jealousy. Of me."

"'Tis true."

"Good. Then I'm about to really shake up his nasty little world."

"What do you have in mind, Hawk?" Rushka asked, the faint trace of a smile carving his weathered face.

The Hawk grinned and rose to his feet. He had work to do.

* * * * *

Adrienne raced up the steps at 93 Coattail Lane with more energy than she'd had in months.

"Marie! Marie!" she cried as she plunged through the door, searching for the diminutive Cuban woman who'd become more than her housekeeper in the past month; she was now more like a mother and a dear friend.

Adrienne had flatly ordered Marie to move into the house with her, and cautiously the two of them had settled into the lovely rituals of friendship; the nightly teas, the morning chats, the shared laughter and tears.

"Marie!" She called again. Then, spying Moonie, she scooped her up and twirled the bewildered kitten around the foyer.

"Adrienne?" She appeared in the doorway, her eyes bright with hope. Marie measured Adrienne a careful moment; her shining face, her sparkling eyes. "You saw him—zee doctor?"

Adrienne bobbed her head and hugged Moonie tightly. The cat gave a

disgruntled snort and squirmed. Adrienne and Marie beamed dumbly at each other over the kitten's head.

"And zee doctor said..." Marie encouraged.

"You were right, Marie! That *is* why I felt so sick. I'm having Hawk's baby, Marie," Adrienne exclaimed, unable to keep the news inside a moment longer. "I have the Hawk's baby inside me!"

Marie clapped her hands and laughed delightedly. Adrienne would heal in time. Having the baby of the man she loved could graft hope into any woman's heart.

* * * * *

The Hawk hired fifty harpers and jesters and taught them new songs. Songs about the puny fairy fool who had been chased away from Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea by the legendary Hawk. And being such a legend in his own time, his tales were ceded great truth and staying power. The players were delighted with the epic grandeur of such a wild tale.

When they had rehearsed to perfection the ditties and refrains portraying the defeat of the fool, the Hawk sent them into the counties of Scotland and England. Grimm accompanied the group of players traveling to Edinburgh to help spread the tale himself, while Hawk spent late hours by the candle scribbling, crossing out and perfecting his command for when the fool came. Sometimes, in the wee hours of the morning, he would reach for his set of sharp awls and blades and begin carving toy soldiers and dolls, one by one.

* * * * *

On the Island of Morar, the Queen smothered a delicate laugh with a tiny hand as strains of the new play drifted across the sea. Adam snarled.

The fool had been gloating for months now over his defeat of the Hawk. Smugly he had said to the King, and to anyone else who would listen, "He may have been pretty, but he was no match for me. Just a stupid pretty face."

The King cocked a mischievous brow, unable to resist taunting the fool. "Stupid, is he? Defeated, was he? My, my, fool,'twould seem we named you thusly in truth. The legend of the fairy fool has just been rewritten. For all eternity mortals shall remember your defeat, not his."

The fool loosened a giant howl of rage and disappeared. This time, Finnbheara went directly to his Queen's side.

"The fool goes to the Hawk," he told her. Adam was in a dreadful temper, and the fool had nearly destroyed their race once before. *The Compact must not be broken.*

The Queen rolled onto her side and measured her consort a long moment. Then she offered her lips for his kisses and Finnbheara knew he was once again in the good graces of his love.

"You did well to tell me, my dear."

* * * * *

Sometimes, very late at night, Adrienne would dream that she walked the green slopes of Dalkeith again. The fresh tang of salt air scented with roses would lick through her hair and caress her skin.

In her dreams the Hawk would be waiting for her by the sea's edge; her kilt-clad, magnificent Scottish laird. He would smile and his eyes would crinkle, then turn dark with smoldering passion.

She would take his hand and lay it gently on her swelling abdomen, and his face would blaze with happiness and pride. Then he would take her gently, there on the cliff's edge, in tempo with the pounding of the ocean. He would make fierce and possessive love to her and she would hold on to him as tightly as she could.

But before dawn, he would melt right through her fingers.

And she would wake up, her cheeks wet with tears and her hands clutching nothing but a bit of quilt or pillow.



CHAPTER 34

1 APRIL 1514

HE WAS NEAR. THE HAWK COULD FEEL HIM AS HE SAT IN HIS STUDY polishing a toy soldier to a smooth, sealed grain while he watched the dawn move over the sea. A tingling awareness started at the base of his spine and worked its way up, heightening all his senses.

The Hawk smiled darkly and laid the toy carefully aside. Something wicked this way comes. *Aye. And I am ready this time, you bastard!*

The Hawk crossed his study to his desk and rolled the thick sheaf of parchment, tucking it into the leather girth of his sporran. He was ready to use it, but only after he had the satisfaction of fighting the smithy on mortal terms.

He stepped into the morning feeling more alive than he'd felt in months. *Hold fast and believe in me, love*, he whispered across the centuries.

Because love and belief were serious magic in and of themselves.

* * * * *

"Come out, coward," he called, his breath frosting in the chill morning air. The snowfall had stopped a few weeks ago, only sparse patches remained, and soon spring would grace Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea once more. *As will my wife*, he vowed fiercely. For days now he'd been tense, knowing something was about to happen. Feeling it in his heart, as the Rom sometimes suffered their premonitions. Then, this morning, he'd woken in the wee hours knowing the time was at hand. The battle would be waged this day, and it was a battle he would win.

"Come on! 'Tis easy to fight anonymously. It only tells me you're too much a coward to declare yourself and face me," he taunted the misty air.

He felt foolish for a moment, then pushed the feeling brusquely aside. Adam Black was near, he knew it clear to the marrow in his bones, goaded by the minstrel plays and a fool's weakness.

"Foe! Face me! Cowardly, puny, sniveling whelp. I bet you used to hide behind

your mama's skirts as a wee lad, didn't you? Quiver and taunt from behind a lass as you do now?" Hawk scoffed into the silent morning. "You used a lass as your pawn. *Anyone* could have played such a weak game. I challenge you to a true contest, gutless worm."

The breeze kicked up, more puckish now, but still no one came. The air swirled thickly in a rush of fast-scuttling clouds with black underbellies. Hawk laughed aloud, feeling exhilaration and strength course through his veins.

"Mortal man knows the truth about you now, Adam—that you couldn't win my wife, that she scorned you for me." Naturally, he omitted the truth that Adam had temporally convinced him that Adrienne had gone willingly. But the Hawk had regained his senses, along with his belief and trust in his wife. "I know she rejected you, smithy! I know you forced her to leave me against her will. She chose me over you and the whole country knows it now."

"Cease, mortal," Adam's voice whispered on the breeze.

The Hawk laughed.

"You find this amusing? You think to incite my wrath and live to laugh about it? Are you truly such a madman? For you are *not* my match."

The Hawk was still smiling when he said softly, "I was more than your match when it came to Adrienne."

"Face your executioner, pretty bird." Adam stepped menacingly out of the dense Highland mist.

The two men regarded each other savagely.

Adam stepped closer.

So did the Hawk. "Fair battle, fickle fae. Unless you're too afraid."

"This is what you called me for? A fistfight?"

"Take a mortal form, Adam. Fight me to the death."

"We don't die." Adam sneered.

"Then fight me to the draw. Fight me fair."

They circled each other warily, muscled frames abristle with unleashed hostility. The violence that had simmered since the moment these two men had met escalated to a roiling boil. It was a relief to the Hawk to have it out, to have it done with. And oh, get his hands on that bastard smithy at last!

"Fair battle is all I've ever done."

"You lie, fool. You cheated at every turn."

"I've never cheated!"

"Well, don't cheat now," Hawk warned as they faced off. "Bare-handed. Man to man, you are my match in size. Are you in strength, agility, and cunning? I think not."

Adam shrugged indolently. "You will rue the day you were born, pretty bird. I've already beaten you and taken your wife, but this day, I will seal your fate. This day I will destroy Dalkeith, until nothing but granite crumbs blow over the cliff's edge to meet the hungry sea. Your bones will be among them, Hawk."

Hawk threw his dark head back and laughed.

* * * * *

Shrouded in the heavy mist, the court of the Tuatha De Danaan watched the fight.

"The Hawk is winning!"

Silvery sigh. "So much man."

"See him move! Fast as a panther, deadly as a python."

"Think not of him, he is safe from all of us now. So I have commanded," the Queen snapped on a frigid gust of air.

A long silence.

"Will the fool play fair?" queried Aine, the quit, mousy fairy.

The Queen sighed. "Has he ever?"

* * * * *

Adrienne clutched Marie's hand and gasped aloud as she felt the soft kick in her womb. Somehow it felt as if the Hawk were near and needed her strength and love. As if something magical hovered, almost tangible enough to grasp with her slender fingers. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly and willed her heart across the chasms of time.

* * * * *

Adam snarled. "Enough of this mortal idiocy. It's time to end this once and for all." He was bleeding, his lip cut and nose shattered. Adam used his immortal strength to fling the Hawk to the ground at his feet. A sword appeared in Adam's hand, and he laid the blade against the mortal's throat. "Compact be damned," Adam muttered, balancing the razor-sharp edge flush to the Hawk's jugular. He cocked a brow and taunted the fallen mortal. "You know, for a moment there, I was worried you might have managed to learn something about my race, the kind of thing we don't like mortals to know. But it seems I was right about you all along, and my worry was for naught. You are truly thick-witted. You really thought you could best me in a fistfight?" Adam shook his head and tsk-tsked. "Hardly. It takes more than that to defeat my kind. Oh, and by the by, prepare to die, mortal."

But his threat elicited nary a quiver from the legend at his feet. Instead the Hawk arrogantly wrapped his hand around the blade and looked deep into Adam's eyes. The intensity of the mortal's gaze latched on to Adam's and held with a strength all its own.

Adam tensed, and a flicker of uncertainty flashed across his face.

Hawk smiled. "*Amadan Dubh*, I compel you thusly..."

Adam froze and his jaw dropped, belying a very human expression of astonishment. The sword melted from his hand as the words of the ancient ritual of binding mired him tightly. "You can't do this!" Adam spit out.

But the Hawk could, and did.

Adam growled low in his throat. It was not a human sound at all.

Twenty minutes later, Adam was gaping in disbelief. The Hawk had actually

unrolled a parchment scroll from his sporran and was reading a very long, very specific list of demands.

"... and you will never come near Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea again..."

Adam shuddered. "Are you almost done, pretty bird?"

The Hawk continued without interruption, unrolling his scroll farther.

"Did you write a goddamn book? You can't do it like this," Adam said through gritted teeth. "You get one command. You can't read that whole thing."

Hawk almost laughed aloud. The trickery would begin now. Any loophole the fickle fairy could find he would try to use. But the Hawk hadn't left any loopholes. He kept reading.

"I said give it up, you infantile, mewling mass of mortality. It won't work."

"... and you will never..." Hawk continued.

Adam snarled and raged, his icy face turning whiter. "I will curse your children, your children's children; I will curse Adrienne and all her children..." Adam dangled evilly.

Hawk stiffened and paused. His eyes flew to Adam's.

Adam stifled a snicker of glee, certain that the Hawk would slip and break his command.

Hawk's lips drew back in a fierce snarl, "... and you will never seek to lay a curse upon my family, my seed, myself, or the family, seed, or self of anyone I command you to forsake or any Douglas commands you to forsake... including Adrienne; with Douglas being expressly defined as any relative by direct blood tie, marriage, or adoption, seed being defined as progeny, children adopted or otherwise obtained, you will not harm any animal belonging to..."

Adam paced a stunted space of earth, fear now evident in his every step.

"... obedience being defined as... and when you return

Adrienne to me, all will be in order at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea... the Hawk and

all his people being protected from any harm, alive and in the best of health with no tricks played... and Adrienne will be bringing her cat safely back through time with her... and..."

Adam's face, once beautiful, was a livid mask of hate, "I will *not* lose! I will find a way to defeat you, Hawk."

"... and you will forgo any thoughts or actions of revenge against the Douglas..."

Adam waved his hand and Adrienne appeared, looking utterly stunned, clutching a clawing cat in her arms.

The Hawk shuddered imperceptibly, knowing this was just one more trick by Adam to get him to break his command. Five months, five horrible, heartless months without a glimpse of his beloved's face, and now she stood before him. Breathtakingly, heart-wrenchingly lovely. Hawk's gaze rested hungrily on her face, her silvery mane, her lush body, her round belly...

Her round belly? His eyes flew to Adrienne's, wide with astonishment and awe, as a violent possessiveness rocked his frame.

His child! His daughter or son. Blood of his blood—his and Adrienne's.

Adrienne was pregnant.

Hawk was speechless.

Adam grinned wickedly—and the Hawk saw it.

He would *not* lose Adrienne. He had too much to read yet. With iron force of will, Hawk averted his eyes from his beloved wife.

It was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his entire life.

Adrienne's eyes devoured him.

She was afraid to interrupt, afraid to move. Somehow she'd been miraculously yanked right out of her library, and Moonie, who had been across the room by the fire, was curled snugly in her arms. She could still see Marie's startled face fading before her eyes.

And there was the Hawk, beloved husband and life itself.

"How could you resist me, Beauty?" Adam was suddenly the smithy again, kilt-clad and glistening. "I am every bit as beautiful as the Hawk and can please you in ways you can't even dream. I could turn you inside out and make you weep with ecstasy. How could you forsake me?"

"I love my husband." She'd spent many months clinging to the hope of the Hawk's child growing inside her and studying everything about Celtic lore she could get her hands on in hopes of finding a way back. But the Hawk, it seemed, had found it for her.

"Love. What is this love thing you mortals prize so highly?" Adam sneered.

Enough, fool, came a silvery peal of the Fairy Queen's sigh.

Even Hawk slurred over his words, midsentence, at that voice.

And enough from you, too, beautiful man, legendary Hawk.

Sweeter than the chiming of bells, her voice was a sensuous stroke of heaven. But Hawk continued, without interruption, "... and as used in this command, the word *person* shall mean and include, where appropriate, an individual or other entity; the plural shall be substituted for the singular and the singular for plural when appropriate; and words of any gender shall include any other gender..."

Adrienne watched her husband, her eyes blazing with love and pride.

The fool will obey me. I am his Queen.

Hawk paused a whisper of a breath, not enough to break continuity, but enough to acknowledge.

And besides, you're past commanding. You're pontificating and being positively redundant. Still, well done, mortal. She is safe, you both are. I will see to it for now and always.

Hawk continued, "... all elements conjoined by ifs, ands, or buts, or other conjoining verbiage shall not, when seemingly in conflict, operate in exclusion or limit in any fashion but shall function conjunctive, overlapping, and allowing the broadest possible definition of the terms as used herein..."

The Fairy Queen sighed. *Ahhh, I see. You will not cease this drivel until I offer you assurance. Clever man. You seek my troth? I grant it. You have the sworn oath of the Fairy Queen upon the pact of the Tuatha De Danaan. T'will never be broken, lest our race vanish.*

Hawk released the scroll and it rolled shut with an audible snap. Only then did Adrienne see the tremor in his hands as he met her gaze, eyes triumphant.

"She has given us protection and fealty." His smile could have lit the Samhain bonfires. His eyes swept her from head to toe, lovingly lingering on every inch in between.

"We're safe?" Adrienne whispered, tears springing to her eyes.

I shall see to it myself, the silvery voice lilted. *Now and for always. Fool?*

Adam growled.

Since I can't seem to keep you out of trouble you have a new companion. Aine will spend the next five hundred years with you. She will endeavor to keep you in line.

Not Aine! Adam's plea was a shade away from a whine. *That snoopy little fairy has a crush on me! I could spend my time pleasing you, my Queen. Let me!*

You will please Aine, fool, or you will spend the next thousand years in the foot of a mountain by yourself. You think you're bored now?

With one last searing look at the Hawk, Adam vanished.

Now where were we? the Queen asked. Adrienne squinted hard in the direction of the voice. She could barely discern the shimmering outline of a woman hovering in the misty air behind the Hawk.

Ah, yes. The two of you were about to have a wedding on the ridge by the sea. The fool has a beastly sense of timing. I shall pick up where it was left off. I, Aoibheal, Queen of the Tuatha De Danaan, name you man and wife. Neither mortal nor immortal shall ever tear you asunder, lest they incur my eternal wrath. There. You've been wed by the Fairy Queen. None can lay claim to such a legend.

Adrienne and the Hawk were still staring at each other across a space of garden, both afraid to move even an inch.

Well? Kiss the woman, you big beautiful man! Go on.

The Hawk sucked in a harsh breath.

He'd changed, Adrienne realized. Time had rendered him even more beautiful than before. She didn't know he was thinking the same thing about her. His eyes slid over her, from her silvery-blond hair to her bare toes peeping from under a pair of strange trousers.

And then she was in his arms, folded in that strong embrace she'd dreamed about every night for the past five months as she lay in bed, her hand resting on her rounded belly, begging the heavens for just one more day with her husband.

He brushed her lips with his. "My heart."

"Your heart is... oh!" She lost her breath beneath his ravishing lips.

"Ahhh," the Queen marveled, for even the Tuatha De Danaan were in awe of true love. *You are worthy of what I now give you*, she whispered just before she vanished. *Consider it a wedding gift...*



EPILOGUE

ADRIENNE BREATHED DEEPLY. NOTHING WOULD EVER compare to the scent of roses and spring rain, the unceasing roar of the waves against the west cliffs and the splash of salt in the unspoiled air. She had ducked outside to watch twilight move in over the sea. Then she would return to Lydia and continue making baby plans. She smothered a laugh with her hand. Lydia had finally outright ordered the Hawk to go away, complaining that she couldn't possibly welcome her daughter-in-law back properly and prepare for her grandchild if he wouldn't stop kissing her all the time. Not that Adrienne had minded.

Like a chastened boy, the Hawk had glared.

"You have the rest of your lives together," Lydia had remarked crisply, "while we women have only a few short months to prepare for the babe."

"A few short months?" Hawk had looked stunned. Then worried. He'd raced off, muttering under his breath.

Now Adrienne stood on the stone stairs, head tilted back, drinking in the quiet beauty of the velvety sky. A flicker of movement on the roof caught her eye.

Grimm peered over the parapet at her and his handsome face lit with a smile. She and the Hawk had talked that afternoon and he had filled her in on what had transpired, including Grimm's part in helping to bring her back. Only hours before, Grimm had clasped his hand to his heart and on bended knee begged forgiveness for lying. She'd granted it readily.

"Hope you're not looking for a star, Grimm," she called up to him.

"Never again," he vowed fervently.

Adrienne gasped, as at precisely that moment a tiny white speck sparked and sputtered, then traced a downward spiral across the sky. "Oh my God! Grimm, look! A shooting star!" She squeezed her eyes shut and wished fiercely.

"What did you just wish?" he growled down at her, rigid with tension.

When she opened her eyes again, she said saucily, "I can't tell. It's against the

rules."

"What did you just wish?" he roared.

"My, aren't we superstitious?" she teased with a smile.

He glowered down at her as she made her way back into the castle. Glancing over her shoulder, she flashed him an impish grin. "Brace yourself, Grimm. I will tell you this much—I spent my wish *on you*"

"Don't you know how dangerous it is to be throwing idle wishes about, lass!" he thundered.

"Oh, this one wasn't idle at all," she called cheerfully before the door swung closed. On the rooftop of Dalkeith, Grimm sank to his knees and stared up into the sky, desperately seeking another wishing star... just in case.

* * * * *

Adrienne's gown rustled as she slipped down the corridor. Lydia had told her where she might find the Hawk and, over tangy mint tea, had filled her in on a few things her husband hadn't bothered to mention to her. Such as the fact that he'd destroyed her beloved nursery, the one she'd lain awake fantasizing about when she'd been stranded in the twentieth century. So *that* was where he'd rushed off to looking so worried about "the scant few months left." She entered the nursery so silently, Hawk did not hear her approach.

She traced her fingers lightly and lovingly over an exquisitely carved doll and paused.

He was kneeling beside a cradle, rubbing oil into the wood with a soft cloth. Clad only in the blues and silvers of his kilt, his dark hair fell forward in a silky wave. The nursery was aglow with dozens of oil globes, casting his powerful torso a gleaming bronze. His eyes were narrowed in concentration and the muscles in his arms flexed and bunched as he rubbed.

Adrienne leaned against the jamb and watched him in silence, tallying the room's meager furnishings. Many of the toys were back, but all the cradles and beds were all gone. What phenomenal passion must have raged through him!

"I suppose I should feel flattered," she said softly.

His head jerked up guiltily.

Adrienne stepped into the room, conscious that her breasts, made fuller by pregnancy, swayed beneath her gown, and that the Hawk seemed fascinated by the ripeness of her lush curves. They'd made love that afternoon, desperately, quickly, and fiercely, scarcely making it from the gardens to the privacy of their bedroom. Lydia had patiently waited all of one hour before she'd knocked on the door and demanded to see her daughter-in-law.

When Adrienne had been trapped back in the twentieth century, fearing she would never be intimate with her husband again, memories of their incredible passion had cascaded through her mind with bittersweet fury, heightening her awareness of all the sensual things she'd longed to do with the Hawk, but had been denied. Those long, torturous months of desire, coupled with the demanding hormones of pregnancy, enhanced her daring now. She hungered for the slow, delicious loving she'd been afraid she might never experience again. "Hawk?"

He gazed up at her, still crouched on the floor, ready to pounce if she so much as moved an inch.

Adrienne moved—deliberately and erotically. She stooped to pick up a toy soldier, bending so that her breasts threatened to spill from her bodice. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and sent the Hawk a smoldering look from beneath lowered lashes. He was on his feet in an instant.

"Stop!" Adrienne raised a hand to hold him back.

Hawk froze mid-stride.

"What do you wish of me, Adrienne?" he whispered huskily.

"I need you," she said breathlessly. He lunged forward and she raised her hand again. "No, let me look at you," she said as she circled slowly around him. She smiled when his eyes widened. "When I was back in my time, one of the things that I really wanted to clear up was a question about Scotsmen and their kilts___"

"And that question was?"

"I saw you mounting your horse one day—"

"I know you did," he said smugly. "You were in the window by the nursery."

"Oh! You *did* do it on purpose!"

Hawk laughed, mischief crinkling his eyes, and it fueled her bold resolve. If he could tease her—well, two could play that game. She'd see how well he handled such toying with his desires.

Stepping closer, Adrienne placed her hand on his muscled thigh and stared into his eyes provocatively. His nostrils flared, and his eyes darkened beneath hooded lids. With her other hand she tugged the bodice of her gown, freeing her breasts to spill over the top. She felt deliciously wicked, knowing her nipples were rosy, puckered, and begging to be kissed. When he leaned forward to do just that, she pushed him back playfully, slid her hand up his thigh, and wrapped it around his shaft, delighted by his husky groan. "Nothing beneath this plaid, just as I suspected," she observed pertly.

"Adrienne. You're *killing* me."

"I've only just begun, my love." She wrapped her fingers around his magnificent arousal and slipped her hand up and down his shaft with a velvety friction.

Hawk grabbed her hips and lowered his head to kiss her; but she moved her head and laughed when he buried his face in her breasts instead.

"Stop," she commanded.

"What?" he asked disbelieving.

"Step back," she encouraged. "Don't touch me until I ask you to. Let me touch you."

Hawk groaned loudly, but let his hands fall from her body. His eyes were fierce and wild, and Adrienne suspected he wouldn't permit her subtle torture much longer.

She leisurely unfastened his kilt and dropped it to the floor. Her husband stood nude before her, his bronze body glistening in the candlelight, his hard shaft bucking insistently. Adrienne traced a fascinated and admiring path over his

shoulders and across his broad, muscled chest. She lightly brushed his lips with hers, kissed his jaw, his nipples, teased his rippled abdomen with her tongue, then sank to her knees, her mouth inches from his shaft, her hands splayed on his thighs. "*Adrienne!*"

She kissed the sweetness of him, stroking her tongue up and down his hard length. Hawk buried his hands in her hair and made a raw sound deep in his throat. "Enough!" he pulled her to her feet and backed her against the ledge beneath the windows. He swept her off her feet, deposited her upon the ledge, and tossed her gown up, spreading her legs to accommodate him. "*Now, Adrienne. I want you now*" He kissed her deeply as he gently but insistently thrust into her beckoning wetness. Adrienne gasped with pleasure as he filled her completely. Hawk stared into her face, taking careful note of each shudder, each moan that escaped her lips, and just when she reached convulsively for the exquisite apex, just when she felt the sweet tremor begin—he stopped moving completely.

"*Hawk!*"

"Will you be teasing me again like this, my love?" he murmured.

"Absolutely," Adrienne replied saucily.

"You *will*?"

"Of course. Because I know my husband would *never* leave me wanting. Just as I would *never* tease him without completely satisfying his desires. So, satisfy me, my sweet highland laird. Take me to Valhalla, husband."

He laughed softly, then thrust into her carefully and gently until they came in perfect tempo. The intensity of their union, so perfect in body and soul, made Adrienne cry aloud with the wonder of it.

Later, the Hawk shut the nursery door and carried his sleepy, satisfied wife to the Peacock Room, where he held her in his arms through the night, marveling at the completeness of his life with her in it.

* * * * *

Lydia smiled when she heard the nursery door close soundly above her. All was well at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea. She paused a dreamy moment imagining the wee

bairns that would grace the nursery soon.

Life had never been sweeter.

But it could be even sweeter still, Lydia.

Lydia's eyes narrowed thoughtfully on Tavis MacTarvitt's back as he stood pensively before the fire. A wave of guilt crashed over her as she recalled how he'd come back to her that night after talking to the Hawk, and she'd turned a cold shoulder to him, and retreated once again into the familiar safety of formality.

The strain in his patient smile was all the reproof he'd betrayed.

My love, he'd called her, and she'd felt so guilt, for having love when her son had been so alone that she had refused to acknowledge it. *How much more time do you plan to waste, lass?*

Very quietly, Lydia unpinned her plaits, freeing her wavy chestnut hair. Her eyes never wavering from Travis's back. With a smile of anticipation she tossed her head upside-down, finger-combed her hair into tousled curls, then flipped it back over her head, allowing it to fall in a wild tumble down her back.

So many years?

She tugged nervously at her gown, studied his back another moment, then shrugged and unbuttoned a few pearl buttons at her collar. She took a deep, trembling breath as the butterflies took silken wing inside her belly.

"Tavis?" she called softly. Once decided, she fully committed to not wasting one more precious moment.

Tavis's back straightened and he peered briefly over his shoulder at her.

She almost laughed aloud when his eyes flew wide and he jerked completely around to face her, his gaze roving over her wild mane, her loosened collar, her parted lips.

"Lydia?"

She heard a hundred questions in his one word, and was thrilled by the

knowledge that she finally had the right answer to give him. "I've been wondering a thing, you see, old man," she said patting the bench beside her. "Those hands of yours..." Her voice trailed off, a wicked sparkle in her eyes. Coquettishly, she wet her lower lip in an invitation older than time itself.

"Aye?" There was a hoarse catch in his voice.

"Being that they're so talented and strong..."

"Aye?" His brows rose. His breath snagged in his throat as Lydia made a suggestion for those hands that shocked and delighted Tavis MacTarvitt to the very seat of his soul.

* * * * *

When Grimm finally left the rooftop that night and entered the Great Hall, he stifled an oath and scrambled, in full retreat, right back out the door. *In the hall, of all places! Lydia! And Tavis!*

"Och! Love!" he grumbled to the stars that twinkled above him with dispassionate splendor.

* * * * *

Three months later the healthy cry of a baby boy resounded through the halls of Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea.

Hawk Douglas, bursting with pride, sat at Adrienne's side on the bed.

"Look at him, Hawk! He's perfect!" Adrienne exclaimed.

"He's not the only one," Hawk said huskily, smoothing her hair back from her forehead.

Adrienne smiled at him. He'd held her hand through her labor, alternating between cursing himself and cursing her for letting him get her pregnant in the first place.

But there would be many more such times, Adrienne thought, because she fully intended to have half a dozen babies. Hawk was just going to have to get used to the process of bringing them into the world.

Adrienne touched his cheek wonderingly. "You're crying," she whispered.

"Happy tears. You've given me a new life, Adrienne—a life I never dreamed I'd have."

She gazed at him adoringly, their baby snuggled between them.

Adrienne could have remained like that for hours, but Grimm entered the Peacock Room just then, briskly ordering the guards about. "Place it there, by the bed."

Hawk glanced over his shoulder. "Ah, the cradle. I finished it last night. I suspect he will not be seeing much of it for a while." Hawk possessively drew their tiny son in his arms. "He should sleep with us for a time, don't you think?"

"I don't think I could allow him out of my sight, could you?"

Hawk nodded his agreement as he studied his son intently. "My jaw," he said proudly. "Just look at that fine strong angle."

Adrienne laughed. "Stubborn angle," she teased, "and he already has dark hair."

Behind them Grimm made a choked sound.

Hawk glanced over his shoulder questioningly.

"What the bloody hell... er, excuse me, milady," he said to Adrienne, "and pardon me, wee one," he said to the babe. "But why did you go and carve this on the cradle, Hawk?" Grimm asked. "Haven't we all had enough of the blasted Fairy?"

Hawk raised his eyebrows in confusion. "What are you talking about, Grimm?" He gently relinquished their son to Adrienne and strode to the cradle.

Flowing letters had been carved deep into the wood. The entire cradle gleamed as if it had been brushed with a sprinkling of gold dust. Hawk gazed a long moment at words he knew *he* hadn't put there. A smile curved his lip as he read aloud to Adrienne:

*Remember this, mortal—you have your own kind of
forever—the immortality of love.*

*Blessed be the Douglas.
Aoibheal, Queen of the Fae*

To Tame a Highland Warrior

Karen Marie Moning

PROLOGUE

**Death itself is better than a life of shame.
Beowulf**

MALDEBANN CASTLE

THE HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND

1499

THE SCREAMING *HAD* TO STOP.

He couldn't endure it another minute, yet he knew he was helpless to save them. His family, his clan, his best friend Arron, with whom he'd ridden the heather fields only yesterday, and his mother—oh, but his mother was another story; her murder had presaged this... this... barbaric...

He turned away, cursing himself for a coward. If he couldn't save them and he couldn't die with them, at least he owed them the honor of scribing the events into his memory. To avenge their deaths.

One at a time, if necessary.

Vengeance doesn't bring back the dead. How many times had his father said that? Once Gavrael had believed him, believed *in* him, but that had been before he'd discovered his mighty, wise, and wonderful da crouched over his mother's body this morning, his shirt bloodstained, a dripping dagger in his fist.

Gavrael McIlloch, only son of the Laird of Maldebann, stood motionless upon Wotan's Cleft, gazing down the sheer cliff at the village of Tuluth, which filled the valley hundreds of feet below. He wondered how this day had turned so bitter. Yesterday had been a fine day, filled with the simple pleasures of a lad who would one day govern these lush Highlands. Then this cruel morning had broken, and with it his heart. After discovering his da crouched above the savaged body of Jolyn McIlloch, Gavrael had fled for the sanctuary of the dense Highland forest, where he'd passed most of the day swinging wildly between rage and grief.

Eventually both had receded, leaving him oddly detached. At dusk, he'd retraced

his path to Castle Maldebann to confront his sire with accusations of murder in a final attempt to make sense of what he'd witnessed, if there was sense to be made. But now, standing on the cliff high above Tuluth, the fourteen-year-old son of Ronin McIlloch realized his nightmare had only begun. Castle Maldebann was under siege, the village was engulfed in flames, and people were darting frantically between pillars of flames and piles of the dead. Gavrael watched helplessly as a small boy sped past a hut, directly into the blade of a waiting McKane. He recoiled; they were only children, but children could grow up to seek vengeance, and the fanatic McKane never left seeds of hatred to take root and bear poisonous fruit.

By the light of the fire engulfing the huts, he could see that the McKane severely outnumbered his people. The distinctive green and gray plaids of the hated enemy were a dozen to each McIlloch. *It's almost as though they knew we'd be vulnerable*, Gavrael thought. More than half the McIlloch were away in the north attending a wedding.

Gavrael despised being fourteen. Although he was tall and broad for his age, with shoulders that hinted at exceptional strength to come, he knew he was no match for the burly McKane. They were warriors with powerfully developed, mature bodies, driven by obsessive hatred. They trained ceaselessly, existing solely to pillage and kill. Gavrael would be no more significant than a tenacious pup yapping at a bear. He could plunge into the battle below, but he would die as inconsequentially as the boy had moments before. If he had to die tonight, he swore he would make it mean something.

Berserker, the wind seemed to whisper. Gavrael cocked his head, listening. Not only was his world being destroyed, now he was hearing voices. Were his wits to fail him before this terrible day ended? He knew the legend of the Berserkers was simply that—a legend.

Beseech the gods, the rustling branches of the pines hissed.

"Right," Gavrael muttered. As he'd been doing ever since he'd first heard the fearsome tale at the age of nine? There was no such thing as a Berserker. It was a foolish tale told to frighten mischievous children into good behavior.

Ber... serk... er. This time the sound was clearer, too loud to be his imagination.

Gavrael spun about and searched the massive rocks behind him. Wotan's Cleft was a tumble of boulders and odd standing stones that cast unnatural shadows beneath the full moon. It was rumored to be a sacred place, where chieftains of yore had met to plan wars and determine fates. It was a place that could almost make a stripling lad believe in the demonic. He listened intently, but the wind carried only the screams of his people.

It was too bad the pagan tales weren't true. Legend claimed Berserkers could move with such speed that they seemed invisible to the human eye until the moment they attacked. They possessed unnatural senses: the olfactory acuity of a wolf, the auditory sensitivity of a bat, the strength of twenty men, the penetrating eyesight of an eagle. The Berserkers had once been the most fearless and feared warriors ever to walk Scotland nearly seven hundred years ago. They had been Odin's elite Viking army. Legend claimed they could assume the shape of a wolf or a bear as easily as the shape of a man. And they were marked by a common feature—unholy blue eyes that glowed like banked coals.

Berserker, the wind sighed.

"There is no such thing as a Berserker," Gavrael grimly informed the night. He was no longer the foolish boy who'd been infatuated with the prospect of unbeatable strength; no longer the youth who'd once been willing to offer his immortal soul for absolute power and control. Besides, his own eyes were deep brown, and always had been. Never had history recorded a brown-eyed Berserker.

Call me.

Gavrael flinched. This last figment of his traumatized mind had been a command, undeniable, irresistible. The hair on the back of his neck stood up on end and his skin prickled. Not once in all his years of playing at summoning a Berserker had he ever felt so peculiar. His blood pounded through his veins and he felt as if he teetered on the brink of an abyss that both lured and repulsed him.

Screams filled the valley. Child after child fell while he stood high above the battle, helpless to alter the course of events. He would do anything to save them: barter, trade, steal, murder—*anything*.

Tears streamed down his face as a tiny lass with blond ringlets wailed her last

breath. There would be no mother's arms for her, no bonny suitor, no wedding, no babes—not a breath more precious life. Blood stained the front of her frock, and he stared at it, mesmerized. His universe narrowed to a tunnel of vision in which the blood blossoming on her chest became a vast, crimson whirlpool, sucking him down and down...

Something inside him snapped.

He threw his head back and howled, the words ricocheting off the rocks of Wotan's Cleft. *"Hear me, Odin, I summon the Berserker! I, Gavrael Roderick Icarus McIllloch, offer my life—nay, my soul—for vengeance. I command the Berserker!"*

The moderate breeze turned suddenly violent, lashing leaves and dirt into the air. Gavrael flung his arms up to shield his face from the needle-sharp sting of flying debris. Branches, no match for the fierce gale, snapped free and battered his body like clumsy spears hurled from the trees. Black clouds scuttled across the night sky, momentarily obscuring the moon. The unnatural wind keened through the channels of rock on Wotan's Cleft, briefly muffling the screams from the valley below. Suddenly the night exploded in a flash of dazzling blue and Gavrael felt his body... change.

He snarled, baring his teeth, as he felt something irrevocable mutate deep within him.

He could smell dozens of scents from the battle below—the rusty, metallic odor of blood and steel and hate.

He could hear whispers from the McKane camp on the far horizon.

He saw for the first time that the warriors appeared to be moving in slow motion. How had he failed to notice it before? It would be absurdly easy to slip in and destroy them all while they were moving as if slogging through wet sand. So easy to destroy. So easy...

Gavrael sucked in rapid breaths of air, pumping his chest full before charging into the valley below. As he plunged into the slaughter, the sound of laughter echoed off the stone basin that cupped the valley. He realized it was coming from his own lips only when the McKane began to fall beneath his sword.

* * * * *

Hours later, Gavrael stumbled through the burning remains of Tuluth. The McKane were gone, either dead or driven off. The surviving villagers were tending the wounded and walking in wide, cautious circles around the young son of the McIlloch.

"Near to threescore ye killed, lad," an old man with bright eyes whispered when Gavrael passed. "Not even yer da in his prime could do such a thing. Ye be far more berserk."

Gavrael glanced at him, startled. Before he could ask what he meant by that comment, the old man melted into the billowing smoke.

"Ye took down three in one swing of yer sword, lad," another man called.

A child flung his arms around Gavrael's knees. "Ye saved me life, ye did!" the lad cried. "Tha' ole McKane woulda had me for his supper. Thank ye! Me ma's thanking ye too."

Gavrael smiled at the boy, then turned to the mother, who crossed herself and didn't look remotely appreciative. His smile faded. "I'm not a monster—"

"I know what ye are, lad." Her gaze never left his. To Gavrael's ears her words were harsh and condemning. "I know exactly what ye are and doona be thinking otherwise. Get on with ye now! Yer da's in trouble." She pointed a quivering finger past the last row of smoldering huts.

Gavrael narrowed his eyes against the smoke and stumbled forward. He'd never felt so drained in all his life. Moving awkwardly, he rounded one of the few huts still standing and jerked to a halt.

His da was crumpled on the ground, covered with blood, his sword abandoned at his side in the dirt.

Grief and anger vied for supremacy in Gavrael's heart, leaving him strangely hollow. As he stared down at his father, the image of his mother's body surged to the forefront of his mind and the last of his youthful illusions shattered; tonight had birthed both an extraordinary warrior and a flesh-and-blood man with inadequate defenses. "Why, Da? Why?" His voice broke harshly on the words.

He would never see his mother smile again, never hear her sing, never attend her burial—for he would be leaving Maldebann once his da replied, lest he turn his residual rage upon his own father. And then what would he be? No better than his da.

Ronin McIlloch groaned. Slowly he opened his eyes in a blood-crusted squint and gazed up at his son. A ribbon of scarlet trickled from his lips as he struggled to speak. "We're... born—" He broke off, consumed by a deep, racking cough.

Gavrael grabbed his father by handfuls of his shirt and, heedless of Ronin's pained grimace, shook him roughly. He would have his answer before he left; he would discover what madness had driven his da to kill his mother or he would be tortured all his life by unanswered questions. "What, Da? Say it! Tell me why!"

Ronin's bleary gaze sought Gavrael's. His chest rose and fell as he drew swift, shallow gasps of smoky air. With a strange undertone of sympathy, he said, "Son, we canna help it... the McIlloch men... always we're born... this way."

Gavrael stared at his father in horror. "You would say that to me? You think you can convince me that I'm mad like you? I'm not like you! I'll not believe you. You lie. You *lie*!" He lunged to his feet, backing hastily away.

Ronin McIlloch forced himself up on his elbows and jerked his head at the evidence of Gavrael's savagery, the remains of McKane warriors who had been literally ripped to pieces. "You did that, son."

"I am *not* a ruthless killer!" Gavrael scanned the mutilated bodies, not quite convinced of his own words.

"It's part of... being McIlloch. You canna help it, son."

"Doona call me son! I will never be your son again. And I'm not part of your sickness. I'm not like you. I will *never* be like you!"

Ronin sank back to the ground, muttering incoherently. Gavrael deliberately closed his ears to the sound. He would not listen to his da's lies a moment longer. He turned his back on him and surveyed what was left of Tuluth. The surviving villagers huddled in small groups, standing in absolute silence, watching him. Averting his face from what he would always remember as their reproving regard, his glance slid up the dark stone of Maldebann castle. Carved into the

side of the mountain, it towered above the village. Once he had wished for nothing more than to grow up and help govern Maldebann at his da's side, eventually taking over as chieftain. He'd wished to always hear the lovely lilt of his mother's laughter filling the spacious halls, to hear his da's answering rumble as they joked and talked. He'd dreamed of wisely settling his people's concerns; of marrying one day and having sons of his own. Aye, once he had believed all those things would come to pass. But in less time than it had taken the moon to bridge the sky above Tuluth, all his dreams, and the very last part of him that had been human, were destroyed.

* * * * *

It took Gavrael the better part of a day to drag his battered body back up into the sanctuary of the dense Highland forests. He could never go home. His mother was dead, the castle ransacked, and the villagers had regarded him with fear. His da's words haunted him—*we're born this way*—killers, capable of murdering even those they claimed to love. It was a sickness of the mind, Gavrael thought, which his father said he, too, carried in his blood.

Thirstier than he'd ever been, he half crawled to the loch nestled in a small valley beyond Wotan's Cleft. He collapsed for a time on the springy tundra, and when he wasn't quite so dizzy and weak he struggled forward to drink, dragging himself on his elbows. As he cupped his hands and bent over the sparkling, clear pool he froze, mesmerized by his reflection rippling in the water.

Ice-blue eyes stared back at him.

CHAPTER 1

DALKEITH-UPON-THE-SEA
THE HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND
1515

GRIMM PAUSED AT THE OPEN DOORS OF THE STUDY and gazed into the night. The reflection of stars dappled the restless ocean, like tiny pinpoints of light cresting the waves. Usually he found the sound of the sea crashing against the rocks soothing, but lately it seemed to incite in him a questing restlessness.

As he resumed pacing, he sifted through possible reasons for his unrest and came up empty-handed. It had been by choice that he remained at Dalkeith as captain of the Douglas guard when, two years ago, he and his best friend, Hawk Douglas, left Edinburgh and King James's service. Grimm adored Hawk's wife, Adrienne—when she wasn't trying to marry him off—and he doted upon their young son, Carthian. He had been, if not exactly happy, content. At least until recently. So what ailed him?

"You're wearing holes in my favorite rug with your pacing, Grimm. And the painter will never be able to finish this portrait if you won't sit down," Adrienne teased, jarring him from his melancholy reverie.

Grimm expelled a breath and ran a hand through his thick hair. Absentmindedly he fiddled with a section at his temple, twisting the strands into a plait as he continued to contemplate the sea.

"You aren't looking for a wishing star out there, are you, Grimm?" Hawk Douglas's black eyes danced with mirth.

"Hardly. And anytime your mischievous wife would care to tell me what curse she laid upon me with her careless wishing, I'd be happy to hear it." Some time ago, Adrienne Douglas had wished upon a falling star, and she steadfastly refused to tell either of them what she'd wished until she was absolutely certain it had been heard and granted. The only thing she would admit was that her wish had been made on Grimm's behalf, which unnerved him considerably. Although he didn't consider himself a superstitious man, he'd seen enough odd occurrences in the world to know that merely because something seemed improbable

certainly didn't render it impossible.

"As would I, Grimm," Hawk said dryly. "But she won't tell me either."

Adrienne laughed. "Go on with the two of you. Don't tell me two such fearless warriors suffer a moment's concern over a woman's idle wish upon a star."

"I consider nothing you do idle, Adrienne," Hawk replied with a wry grin. "The universe does *not* behave in a normal fashion where you're concerned."

Grimm smiled faintly. It certainly didn't. Adrienne had been tossed back in time from the twentieth century, the victim of a wicked plot to destroy the Hawk, concocted by a vindictive Fairy. Impossible things happened around Adrienne, which was why he wanted to know what bloody wish she'd made. He'd like to be prepared when all hell broke loose.

"Do sit down, Grimm," Adrienne urged. "I want this portrait finished by Christmas at the latest, and it takes Albert months to paint from his sketches."

"Only because my work is sheer perfection," the painter said, miffed.

Grimm turned his back on the night and reclaimed his seat by Hawk in front of the fire. "I still doona get the point of this," Grimm muttered. "Portraits are for lasses and children."

Adrienne snorted. "I commission a painter to immortalize two of the most magnificent men I've ever laid eyes upon"—she flashed them a dazzling smile, and Grimm rolled his eyes, knowing he would do whatever the lovely Adrienne wished when she smiled like that—"and all they can do is grumble. I'll have you know, one day you'll thank me for doing this."

Grimm and Hawk exchanged amused glances, then resumed the pose she insisted displayed their muscular physiques and dark good looks to their finest advantage.

"Be certain you color Grimm's eyes as brilliantly blue as they are," she instructed Albert.

"As if I don't know how to paint," he muttered. "I *am* the artist here. Unless, of course, you'd like to try your hand at it."

"I thought you liked *my* eyes." Hawk narrowed his black eyes at Adrienne.

"I do. I married you, didn't I?" Adrienne teased, smiling. "Can I help it if the staff at Dalkeith, to the youngest maid of a tender twelve years, swoons over your best friend's eyes? When I hold my sapphires up to the sunlight, they look exactly the same. They shimmer with iridescent blue fire."

"What are mine? Puny black walnuts?"

Adrienne laughed. "Silly man, that's how I described your heart when I first met you. And stop fidgeting, Grimm," she chided. "Or is there some reason you want those braids at your temples in this portrait?"

Grimm froze, then slowly touched his hair in disbelief.

Hawk stared at him. "What's on your mind, Grimm?" he asked, fascinated.

Grimm swallowed. He hadn't even realized he'd plaited the war braids into his hair. A man wore war braids only during the blackest hours of his life—when he was mourning his lost mate or preparing for battle. So far, he'd worn them twice. What had he been thinking? Grimm stared blankly at the floor, confused, unable to vocalize his thoughts. Lately he'd been obsessed with ghosts of the past, memories he'd tossed savagely into a shallow grave years ago and buried beneath a thin sod of denials. But in his dreams the shadow corpses walked again, trailing behind them a residue of unease that clung to him throughout the day.

Grimm was still struggling to answer when a guard burst through the doors to the study.

"Milord. Milady." The guard nodded deferentially to Hawk and Adrienne as he hastily entered the room. He approached Grimm, a somber expression on his face. "This just came for ye, Cap'n." He thrust an official-looking piece of parchment into Grimm's hands. "The messenger insisted'twas urgent, and to be delivered into your hands only." Grimm turned the message slowly in his hand. The elegant crest of Gibraltar St. Clair was pressed into the red wax. Suppressed memories broke over him: *Jillian*. She was a promise of beauty and joy he could never possess, a memory he'd consigned to that same uncooperative, shallow grave that now seemed determined to regurgitate its dead.

"Well, open it, Grimm," Adrienne urged.

Slowly, as if he held a wounded animal that might turn on him with sharp teeth, Grimm broke the seal and opened the missive. Stiffly, he read the terse, three-word command. His hand fisted reflexively, crumpling the thick vellum.

Rising, he turned to the guard. "Prepare my horse. I leave in one hour." The guard nodded and left the study.

"Well?" Hawk demanded. "What does it say?"

"Nothing you need to address, Hawk. Doona worry. It doesn't concern you."

"Anything that concerns my best friend concerns me," Hawk said. "So give over, what's wrong?"

"I said nothing. Leave it, man." Grimm's voice held a note of warning that would have restrained a lesser man's hand. But the Hawk had never been, and would never be, a lesser man, and he moved so unexpectedly that Grimm didn't react quickly enough when he whisked the parchment from his hand. Grinning mischievously, Hawk backed away and uncrumpled the parchment. His grin broadened, and he winked at Adrienne.

"'Come for Jillian,' it says. A woman, is it? The plot thickens. I thought you'd sworn off women, my fickle friend. So who's Jillian?"

"A woman?" Adrienne exclaimed delightedly. "A young, marriageable woman?"

"Stop it, you two. It's not like that."

"Then why were you trying to keep it a secret, Grimm?" Hawk pressed.

"Because there are things you doona know about me, and it would take far too long to explain. Lacking the leisure to tell you the full story, I'll send you a message in a few months," he evaded coolly.

"You're not getting out of this so easily, Grimm Roderick." Hawk rubbed the shadow beard on his stubborn jaw thoughtfully. "Who is Jillian, and how do you know Gibraltar St. Clair? I thought you came to court directly from England. I thought you knew no one in all of Scotland but for those you met at court."

"I didn't exactly tell you the whole story, Hawk, and I doona have time for it now, but I'll tell you as soon as I get settled."

"You'll tell me now, or I'm coming with you," Hawk threatened. "Which means Adrienne and Carthian are coming as well, so you can either tell me or prepare for company, and you never know what might happen if Adrienne comes along."

Grimm scowled. "You really can be a pain, Hawk."

"Relentless. Formidable," Adrienne agreed sweetly. "You may as well give in, Grimm. My husband never takes no for an answer. Believe me, I know this."

"Come on, Grimm, if you can't trust me, who can you trust?" he coaxed. "Where are you going?"

"It's not a question of trust, Hawk." Hawk merely waited with an expectant look on his face, and Grimm knew he had no intention of relenting. Hawk would push and poke and ultimately do exactly as he'd threatened—come along—unless Grimm gave him a sufficient answer. Perhaps it was time he admitted the truth, although the odds were that once he did, he wouldn't be welcomed back at Dalkeith. "I'm going home, sort of," Grimm finally conceded.

"*Caithness* is your home?"

"Tuluth," Grimm muttered.

"What?"

"Tuluth," Grimm said flatly. "I was born in Tuluth."

"You said you were born in Edinburgh!"

"I lied."

"Why? You told me your entire family was dead! Was that a lie too?"

"No! They are. I didn't lie about that. Well... mostly I didn't lie," he corrected hastily. "My da is still alive, but I haven't spoken to him in more than fifteen years."

A muscle twitched in Hawk's jaw. "Sit down, Grimm. You're not going anywhere

until you tell me all of it, and I suspect it's a tale that's long overdue."

"I doona have time, Hawk. If St. Clair said it was urgent, I was needed at Caithness weeks ago."

"What relevance has Caithness to any of this, or to you? Sit. Talk. *Now*"

Sensing no possibility of reprieve, Grimm paced as he began his story. He told them how, at the age of fourteen, he'd left Tuluth the night of the massacre and wandered the forests of the Highlands for two years, wearing his war braids and hating mankind, hating his father, hating himself. He skipped the brutal parts—his mother's murder, the starvation he'd endured, the repeated attempts on his life. He told them that when he was sixteen he'd found shelter with Gibraltar St. Clair; that he'd changed his name to Grimm to protect himself and those for whom he cared. He told them how the McKane had found him again at Caithness and attacked his foster family. And finally, in the tone of a dreaded confession, he told them what his real name had been.

"What did you just say?" Hawk asked blankly.

Grimm drew a deep breath into his lungs and expelled it angrily. "I said Gavrael. My real name is Gavrael." There was only one Gavrael in all of Scotland; no other man would willingly own up to that name and that curse. He braced himself for the Hawk's explosion. He didn't have to wait for long.

"McIllloch?" Hawk's eyes narrowed disbelievingly.

"McIllloch," Grimm confirmed.

"And Grimm?"

"Grimm stands for Gavrael Roderick Icarus McIllloch." Grimm's Highland brogue rolled so thickly around the name, it was a nearly unintelligible burr of r's and l's and staccato-sharp k's. "Take the first letter of each name, and there you have it. G-R-I-M."

"Gavrael McIllloch was a Berserker!" Hawk roared.

"I told you you didn't know so much about me," Grimm said darkly.

Crossing the study in three swift strides, Hawk bristled to a stop inches from

Grimm's face and studied him, as if he might uncover some telltale trace of a beast that should have betrayed Grimm's secret years ago. "How could I not have known?" Hawk muttered. "For years I'd been wondering about some of your peculiar... talents. By the bloody saints, I should have guessed if only from your eyes—"

"Lots of people have blue eyes, Hawk," Grimm said dryly.

"Not like yours, Grimm," Adrienne remarked.

"This explains it all," Hawk said slowly. "You're not human."

Grimm flinched.

Adrienne leveled a dark look at her husband and linked her arm through Grimm's. "Of course he's human, Hawk. He's just human... plus some."

"A Berserker." Hawk shook his head. "A fardling Berserker. You know, they say William Wallace was a Berserker."

"And what a lovely life he had, eh?" Grimm said bitterly.

* * * * *

Grimm rode out shortly thereafter, answering no more questions and leaving the Hawk immensely dissatisfied. He left quickly, because the memories were returning of their own accord and with fury. Grimm knew he had to be alone when full recollection finally reclaimed him. He didn't willingly think about Tuluth anymore. Hell, he didn't willingly think anymore, not if he could help it.

Tuluth: in his memory a smoky valley, clouds of black so thick his eyes had stung from the acrid stench of burning homes and burning flesh. Children screaming. *Och, Christ!*

Grimm swallowed hard as he spurred Occam into a gallop across the ridge. He was impervious to the beauty of the Highland night, lost in another time, surrounded only by the color of blood and the blackness of soul-disfiguring desolation—with one shimmering spot of gold.

Jillian.

Is he an animal, Da? May I keep him? Please? He's an ever-so-glorious beastie!

And in his mind he was sixteen years old again, looking down at the wee golden lass. Memory swept over him, dripping shame thicker than clotted honey off a comb. She'd found him in the woods, scavenging like a beast.

He'd be fiercer than my Savanna TeaGarden, Da!

Savanna TeaGarden being her puppy, all one hundred forty pounds of Irish wolfhound puppy.

He'd protect me well, Da, I know he would!

The instant she'd said the words, he'd taken a silent vow to do just that, never dreaming it might one day entail protecting her from himself.

Grimm rubbed his clean-shaven jaw and tossed his head in the wind. For a brief moment he felt the matted hair again, the dirt and sweat and the war braids, the fierce eyes brimming with hatred. And the pure, sweet child had trusted him on sight.

Och, but he'd dissuaded her quickly.

CHAPTER 2

GIBRALTAR AND ELIZABETH ST. CLAIR HAD BEEN RIDING toward their son's home in the Highlands for over a week before Gibraltar finally confessed his plan. He wouldn't have told her at all, but he couldn't stand to see his wife upset.

"Did you hear that?" Elizabeth said accusingly to her husband as she rounded her mare and cantered back to his side. "Did you?"

"Hear what? I couldn't hear a thing. You were too far away," he teased.

"That's it, Gibraltar. I've had it!"

Gibraltar raised an inquiring brow. "What's it, love?" Flushed with outrage, his wife was even more alluring than she was when calm. He wasn't above gently provoking her to enjoy the show.

Elizabeth tossed her head briskly. "I am sick of hearing men talk about our flawless, saintly, unwed—as in nearly a spinster—daughter, Gibraltar."

"You've been eavesdropping again, haven't you, Elizabeth?" he asked mildly,

"Eavesdropping, schmeavesdropping. If my daughter is being discussed, even if only by the guards"—she gestured in their direction irritably—"I have every right to listen. Our fearsome protectors, who I might point out are perfectly healthy full-grown men, have been trading tributes to her virtues. By virtues they don't mean her breasts or any of her lovely curves, but her sweet temper, her patience, her calling to the cloister, for goodness' sake. Did she breathe a word to you about this sudden inclination to devote herself to the nunnery?" Without waiting for an answer, Elizabeth reined in her mount and glared at him. "They go on and on about how flawless she is and not one of them says a word about tugging her."

Gibraltar laughed as he drew his stallion to a halt beside her mare.

"How dare you think this is funny?"

Gibraltar shook his head, his eyes sparkling. Only Elizabeth would take offense

that men didn't talk about seducing their only daughter.

"Gibraltar, I must ask you to be serious for a moment. Jillian is twenty-one years old and not one man has seriously tried to court her. I vow she's the most exquisite lass in all of Scotland, and men walk quietly worshipful circles around her. *Do* something, Gibraltar. I'm getting worried."

His smile faded. Elizabeth was right. It was no longer a laughing matter. Gibraltar had reached that conclusion himself. It wasn't fair to let Elizabeth continue worrying when he'd taken action that would soon put both their fears to rest. "I've already taken care of it, Elizabeth."

"What do you mean? What have you done this time?"

Gibraltar studied her intently. At the moment he wasn't completely certain which would upset Elizabeth more: continued worry over their daughter's unwed state, or the details of what he'd done without consulting her. A uniquely masculine moment of reflection convinced him she would be dazzled by his ingenuity. "I've arranged for three men to attend Caithness in our absence, Elizabeth. By the time we return, either Jillian will have chosen one of them, or one of them will have chosen her. They are not the kind of men to give up in the face of a wee bit of resistance. Nor are they the kind of men to fall for her 'nunnery stories.'"

Elizabeth's horrified expression deflated his smug pose. "One of them will choose her? Are you saying that one of these men you've selected might compromise her if she doesn't choose?"

"Seduce, Elizabeth, not compromise," Gibraltar protested. "They wouldn't ruin her. They're all honorable, respectable lairds." His voice deepened persuasively. "I selected these three based in part on the fact that they're also all very... er"—he searched for a word innocuous enough that it wouldn't alarm his wife, because the men he'd chosen could be patently alarming—"... masculine men." His perfunctory nod was intended to soothe her concerns. It failed. "Exactly what Jillian needs," he assured her.

"Masculine! You mean randy inveterate blackguards! Probably domineering and ruthless, to boot. Don't prevaricate with me, Gibraltar!"

Gibraltar sighed gustily, any hope of subtle persuasion debunked. "Do you have

a better idea, Elizabeth? Frankly, I think the problem is that Jillian has never met a man who wasn't intimidated by her. I guarantee you not one of the men I've invited will be even remotely intimidated. Captivated? Yes. Intrigued? Yes. Ruthlessly persistent? Yes. Precisely what a Sacheron woman needs. A man who is man enough to *do* something about it."

Elizabeth St. Clair, nee Sacheron, nibbled her lower lip in silence.

"You know how you've been longing to see our new grandson," he reminded her. "Let's just go on with our visit and see what happens. I promise you that none of the men I've chosen will harm a hair on our precious daughter's head. They might muss it up a bit, but that will be well and good for her. Our impeccable Jillian is long overdue for some mussing."

"You expect me to just go off and leave her with three men? *Those* kind of men?"

"Elizabeth, those kind of men are the only kind of men who will not worship her. Besides, I was once one of those kind of men, if you'll recall. It will take an uncommon man for our uncommon daughter, Elizabeth," he added more gently. "I aim to find her that uncommon man."

Elizabeth sighed and blew a tendril of hair from her face. "I suppose you've the right of it," she murmured. "She truly hasn't met a man who didn't worship her. I wonder, how do you think she'll react when she does?"

"I suspect she might not know what to do at first. It may throw her badly off balance. But I'm wagering one of the men I've selected will help her figure it out," Gibraltar said smoothly.

Alarm vanquished Elizabeth's despondence instantly. "That's it. We'll just have to go back. I can't be somewhere else when my daughter is experiencing these woman things for the first time. God only knows what some man will try to teach my daughter or how he'll try to teach it to her, not to mention how shocked she's certain to be. I can't be off visiting while my daughter is being bullied and bamboozled out of her maidenhead—it simply won't do! We'll have to go home." She gazed expectantly at her husband, awaiting his nod of agreement.

"Elizabeth." Gibraltar said her name very quietly.

"Gibraltar?" Her tone was wary.

"We are not turning back. We are going to visit our son to attend our grandson's christening and spend a few months, as planned."

"Does Jillian know what you've done?" Elizabeth asked icily.

Gibraltar shook his head. "She hasn't a suspicion in her pretty head."

"What about the men? Don't you think they will tell her?"

Gibraltar grinned wickedly. "I didn't tell them. I simply commanded their attendance. But Hatchard knows and is prepared to inform them at a suitable time."

Elizabeth was shocked. "You told no one but our chief man-at-arms?"

"Hatchard is a wise man. And she needs this, Elizabeth. She needs to find her own way. Besides," he provoked, "what man would dare bamboozle a lass's maidenhead with her mother hovering at her elbow?"

"Och! My mother, my da, my seven brothers, and my grandparents being in attendance didn't stop you from bamboozling mine. Or abducting me."

Gibraltar chuckled. "Are you sorry I did?"

Elizabeth gave him a steamy look from beneath her lashes that assured him to the contrary.

"So you see, sometimes a man knows best, don't you think, my dear?"

She didn't reply for a moment, but Gibraltar didn't mind. He knew Elizabeth trusted him with her life. She just needed some time to get used to his plan and to accept the fact that their daughter needed a loving push over the edge of the nest.

When Elizabeth finally spoke, resignation buffered her words. "Just which three men did you choose without my discerning insight and consent?"

"Well, there's Quinn de Moncreiffe." Gibraltar's gaze never strayed from her face.

Quinn was blond, handsome and daring. He'd sailed black-flag for the King before he'd inherited his titles and now commanded a fleet of merchant ships, from which he'd trebled his clan's already considerable fortune. Gibraltar had fostered Quinn when he'd been a young lad, and Elizabeth had always favored him.

"Good man." A lift of a perfect golden brow betrayed grudging admiration for her husband's wisdom. "And?"

"Ramsay Logan."

"Oh!" Elizabeth's eyes grew round. "When I saw him at court he was clad in black from head to toe. He looked as dangerously attractive as a man could be. How is it that some woman hasn't snatched him up? Do go on, Gibraltar. This is becoming quite promising. Who's the third?"

"We're lagging too far behind the guards, Elizabeth," Gibraltar evaded glibly. "The Highlands have been peaceful lately, but we can't be too careful. We must catch up." He shifted in his saddle, grasped her reins, and urged her to follow.

Elizabeth scowled as she plucked the reins from his hand. "We'll catch them later. Who's the third?"

Gibraltar frowned and gazed at the guards, who were fading out of sight around a bend. "Elizabeth, we mustn't tarry. You have no idea—"

"The third, Gibraltar," his wife repeated.

"You look especially lovely today, Elizabeth," Gibraltar said huskily. "Have I told you that?" When his words evoked no response but a cool, level stare, he wrinkled his brow.

"Did I say three?"

Elizabeth's expression grew cooler.

Gibraltar expelled a breath of frustration. He mumbled a name and spurred his mount forward.

"What did you just say?" she called after him, urging her mare to keep up.

"Oh hell, Elizabeth! Give over! Let's just ride."

"Repeat yourself, please, Gibraltar."

There was another unintelligible answer.

"I can't understand a word when you mumble," Elizabeth said sweetly.

Sweet as siren song, he thought, *and every bit as lethal*. "I said Gavrael McIlloch. All right? Leave it, will you?" He rounded his stallion sharply and glared, savoring the fact that at least for the time being he'd rendered her as close to speechless as Elizabeth St. Clair ever came.

Elizabeth stared at her husband in disbelief. "Dear God in heaven, he's summoned the Berserker!"

* * * * *

On the sloping lawn of Caithness, Jillian St. Clair shivered despite the warmth of the brightly shining sun. Not one cloud dotted the sky, and the shady forest that rimmed the south end of the lawn was a dozen yards away—not close enough to have been responsible for her sudden chill.

An inexplicable sense of foreboding crept up the back of her neck. She shook it off briskly, berating her overactive imagination. Her life was as unmarred by clouds as the expansive blue sky; she was being fanciful, nothing more.

"Jillian! Make Jemmie stop pulling my hair!" Mallory cried, dashing to Jillian's side for protection. The lush green grass of the lawn was sprinkled with the dozen or so children who gathered every afternoon to cajole stories and sweets from Jillian.

Sheltering Mallory in her arms, Jillian regarded the lad reprovingly. "There are better ways to show a lass that you like her than pulling her hair, Jemmie MacBean. And it's been my experience that the girls whose hair you pull now are the ones you'll be courting later."

"I didn't pull her hair because I *like* her!" Jemmie's face turned red and his hands curled into defiant fists. "She's a *girl*."

"Aye, she is. And a lovely one at that." Jillian smoothed Mallory's luxuriant, long

auburn hair. The young lass already showed promise of the beautiful woman she would become. "Pray tell, why *do* you pull her hair, Jemmie?" Jillian asked lightly.

Jemmie kicked at the grass with his toes. "Because if I punched her the same way I punch the lads, she'd probably cry," he mumbled.

"Why must you do anything to her at all? Why not simply talk to her?"

"What could a *girl* have to say?" He rolled his eyes and scowled at the other lads, wordlessly demanding support with his fierce glare.

Only Zeke was unaffected by his bullying. "Jillian has interesting things to say, Jemmie," Zeke argued. "You come here every afternoon to listen to her, and *she's* a girl."

"That's different. She's not a girl. She's... well, she's almost like a mother to us, 'cept she's a lot prettier."

Jillian brushed a strand of blond hair back from her face with an inward wince. What had "prettier" ever done for her? She longed to have children of her own, but children required a husband, and one of those didn't appear to be on the horizon for her, pretty or not. *Well, you could stop being so picky*, her conscience advised dryly.

"Shall I tell you a story?" She swiftly changed the subject.

"Yes, tell us a story, Jillian!"

"A romantic one!" an older girl called.

"A bloody one," Jemmie demanded.

Mallory scrunched her nose at him. "Give us a fable. I love fables. They teach us good things, and some of us"—she glared at Jemmie—"need to learn good things."

"Fables are dumb—"

"Are not!"

"A fable! A fable!" the children clamored.

"A fable you shall have. I shall tell you of the argument between the Wind and the Sun," Jillian said. "It's my favorite of all the fables." The children jostled for the seat closest to her as they settled down to hear the tale. Zeke, the smallest of them, was shoved to the back of the cluster.

"Don't squint, Zeke," Jillian chided kindly. "Here, come closer." She drew the boy onto her lap and pushed the hair out of his eyes. Zeke was her favorite maid, Kaley Twillow's, son. He'd been born with such weak eyesight that he could scarcely see past his own hand. He was forever squinting, as if it might one day work a miracle and bring the world into focus. Jillian couldn't imagine the sorrow of not being able to clearly see the lovely landscape of Scotia, and her heart wept for Zeke's handicap. It prevented him from playing the games the other children adored. He was far more likely to be hit by the bladder-skin ball than to hit it, so to compensate Jillian had taught him to read. He had to bury his nose in the book, but therein he'd found worlds to explore he could never have seen with his own eyes.

As Zeke nestled into her lap, she began. "One day the Wind and the Sun were having an argument over who was stronger, when suddenly they saw a tinker coming down the road. The Sun said, 'Let us decide our dispute now. Whichever of us can cause the tinker to take off his cloak shall be regarded as the stronger.'

"The Wind agreed to the contest. 'You begin,' the Sun said, and retired behind a cloud so he wouldn't interfere. The Wind began to blow as hard as it could upon the tinker, but the more he blew, the tighter the tinker clutched his cloak about his body. That didn't deter the Wind from giving it all he had; still the tinker refused to yield his cloak. Finally the Wind gave up in despair.

"Then the Sun came out and blazed in all his glory upon the tinker, who soon found it too warm to walk with his cloak on. Removing it, he tossed the garment over his shoulder and continued on his journey, whistling cheerily."

"Yay!" the girls cheered. "The Sun won! We like the Sun better too!"

"It's a stupid girl story." Jemmie scowled.

"I liked it," Zeke protested.

"You would, Zeke. You're too blind to be seeing warriors and dragons and swords. I like stories with adventure."

"This tale had a point, Jemmie. The same point I was making about you pulling Mallory's hair," Jillian said gently.

Jemmie looked bewildered. "It did? What does the Sun have to do with Mai's hair?"

Zeke shook his head, disgusted by Jemmie's denseness. "She was telling us that the Wind tried to make the tinker feel bad, so the tinker needed to defend himself. The Sun made the tinker feel good and warm and safe enough to walk freely."

Mallory beamed adoringly at Zeke, as if he were the cleverest lad in the world. Zeke continued seriously, "So be nice to Mallory and she'll be nice to you."

"Where do you get your halfwit ideas?" Jemmie asked, irritated.

"He listens, Jemmie," Jillian said. "The moral of the fable is that kindness affects more than cruelty. Zeke understands that there's nothing wrong with being nice to the lasses. One day you'll be sorry you weren't nicer." *When Zeke ends up with half the village lasses hopelessly in love with him despite his weak vision*, Jillian thought, amused. Zeke was a handsome young lad and would one day be an attractive man possessing the unique sensitivity those born with a handicap tended to develop.

"She's right, lad." A deep voice joined their conversation as a man spurred his horse from the shelter of the nearby trees. "I'm *still* sorry I wasn't nicer to the lasses."

The blood in Jillian's veins chilled and her cloudless life was suddenly awash with thick, black thunderheads. Surely *that* man would never be fool enough to come back to Caithness! She pressed her cheek into Zeke's hair, hiding her face, wishing she could melt into the ground and disappear, wishing she had put on a more elegant gown this morning—as ever, wishing impossible things where this man was concerned. Although she hadn't heard his voice in years, she knew it was he.

"I recall a lass I was mean to when I was a lad, and now, knowing what I know,

I'd give a great deal to take it all back."

Grimm Roderick. Jillian felt as if her muscles had melted beneath her skin, fused by the heat of his voice. Two full timbres lower than any other voice she'd ever heard, modulated so precisely it conveyed intimidating self-discipline, his was the voice of a man in control.

She raised her head and stared at him, her eyes wide with shock and horror. Her breath caught in her throat. No matter how the years changed him, she would always recognize him. He'd dismounted and was approaching her, moving with the detached arrogance and grace of a conqueror, exuding confidence as liberally as he exhaled. Grimm Roderick had always been a walking weapon, his body developed and honed to instinctual perfection. Were she to scramble to her feet and faint left, Jillian knew he'd be there before her. Were she to back up, he'd be behind her. Were she to scream, he could cover her mouth before she'd even finished drawing her breath in preparation. She'd only once before seen a creature move with such speed and repressed power: one of the mountain cats whose muscles bunched in springy recoil as they padded about on dangerous paws.

She drew a shaky breath. He was even more magnificent than he'd been years ago. His black hair was neatly restrained in a leather thong. The angle of his jaw was even more arrogant than she remembered—if that was possible; jutting slightly forward, it caused his lower lip to curl in a sensual smirk regardless of the occasion.

The air itself felt different when Grimm Roderick was in it; her surroundings receded until nothing existed but him. And she could never mistake those eyes! Mocking blue-ice, his gaze locked with hers over the heads of the forgotten curious children. He was watching her with an unfathomable expression.

She lunged to her feet, tumbling a startled Zeke to the ground. As Jillian stared wordlessly at Grimm, memories surfaced and she nearly drowned in the bitter bile of humiliation. She recalled too clearly the day she'd vowed never to speak to Grimm Roderick again. She'd sworn never to permit him near Caithness—or near her vulnerable heart again—as long as she lived. And he dared saunter up now? As if nothing had changed? The possibility of reconciliation was instantly squashed beneath the weighty heels of her pride. She would not dignify his presence with words. She would not be nice. She would not grant him one ounce

of courtesy.

Grimm worried a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. "You've... grown, lass."

Jillian struggled to speak. When she finally found her tongue, her words dripped ice. "How dare you come back here? You are not welcome. Leave my home!"

"I can't do that, Jillian." His soft voice unnerved her.

Her heart racing, she drew a slow, deep breath. "If you don't leave of your own accord, I'll summon the guards to remove you."

"They won't do that, Jillian."

She clapped her hands. "Guards!" she cried.

Grimm didn't move an inch. "It won't help, Jillian."

"And quit saying my name like that!"

"Like what, Jillian?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"Like... like... a prayer or something."

"As you wish." He paused the length of two heartbeats—during which she was astonished he'd capitulated to her will, because he certainly never had before—then he added with such husky resonance that it slipped inside her heart without her consent, "Jillian."

Perish the man! "Guards. Guards!"

Her guards arrived on a run, then halted abruptly, studying the man standing before their mistress.

"Milady, you summoned?" Hatchard inquired.

"Remove this iniquitous scoundrel from Caithness before he breeds... *brings*"—she corrected herself hastily—"his depravity and wicked insolence into my home," she sputtered to a finish.

The guards looked from her to Grimm and didn't move.

"Now. Remove him from the estate at once!"

When the guards still didn't move, her temper rose a notch. "Hatchard, I said make him leave. By the sweet saints, toss him out of my life. Banish him from the country. Och! Just remove him from this *world*, will you, now?"

The flank of guards stared at Jillian with openmouthed astonishment. "Are you feeling well, milady?" Hatchard asked. "Should we fetch Kaley to see if you've a touch of the fever?"

"I don't have a touch of anything. There's a degenerate knave on my estate and I want him off it," Jillian said through gritted teeth.

"Did you just grit?" Hatchard gaped.

"Pardon?"

"Grit. It means to speak from between clenched teeth—"

"I'm going to scream from between clenched teeth if you disobedient wretches don't remove this degenerate, virile"—Jillian cleared her throat—"vile rogue from Caithness."

"Scream?" Hatchard repeated faintly. "Jillian St. Clair doesn't scream, she doesn't grit, and she certainly doesn't have fits of temper. What the devil is going on here?"

"He's the devil," Jillian seethed, motioning to Grimm.

"Call him what you will, milady. I still can't remove him," Hatchard said heavily.

Jillian's head jerked as if he'd struck her. "You disobey me?"

"He doesn't disobey you, Jillian," Grimm said quietly. "He obeys your da."

"What?" She turned her ashen face to his. He proffered a crumpled, soiled piece of parchment.

"What is that?" she asked icily, refusing to move even an inch closer.

"Come and see, Jillian," he offered. His eyes glittered strangely.

"Hatchard, get that from him."

Hatchard didn't budge. "I know what it says."

"Well then, what does it say?" she snapped at Hatchard. "And how do you know?"

It was Grimm who answered. "It says 'come for Jillian'... Jillian."

He'd done it again, added her name after a pause, a husky veneration that left her oddly breathless and frightened. There was a warning in the way he was saying her name, something she should understand but couldn't quite grasp. Something had changed since they'd last fought so bitterly, something in him, but she couldn't define it. "Come for Jillian?" she repeated blankly. "My da sent you that?"

When he nodded, Jillian choked and nearly burst into tears. Such a public display of emotion would have been a first for her. Instead, she did something as unexpected and heretofore undone as gritting and cursing; Jillian spun on her heel and bolted toward the castle as if all the banshees of Scotland were nipping at her heels, when in truth it was the one and only Grimm Roderick—which was far worse.

Sneaking a glance over her shoulder, she belatedly remembered the children. They were standing in a half-circle, gaping at her with disbelief. She stormed, absolutely mortified, into the castle. Slamming the door was a bit difficult, since it was four times as tall as she was, but in her current temper she managed.

CHAPTER 3

"INCONCEIVABLE!" JILLIAN SEETHED AS SHE PACED HER chambers. She tried to calm down, but reluctantly concluded that until she got rid *of him*, calm was not possible.

So she stormed and paced and considered breaking things, except that she liked everything in her room and didn't really want to break any of her own belongings. But if she could only have gotten her hands on him, oh—then she'd have broken a thing or two!

Vexed, she muttered beneath her breath while she quickly slipped out of her gown. She refused to ponder her urge to replace the plain gown and chemise that had been perfectly suitable only an hour before. Nude, she stalked to her armoire by the window, where she was momentarily distracted by the sight of riders in the courtyard. She peered out the tall opening. Two horsemen were riding through the gate. She studied them curiously, leaning into the window. As one, the men raised their heads, and she gasped. A smile crossed the blond man's face, giving her the impression he'd glimpsed her poised in the window, clad in nothing but temper-flushed skin. Instinctively she ducked behind the armoire and snatched up a gown of brilliant green, assuring herself that just because she could see them clearly didn't mean they could see her. Surely the window reflected the sun and permitted little passage of vision.

Who else was arriving at Caithness? she fumed. *He* was bad enough. How dare he come here, and furthermore, how dare her da summon him? *Come for Jillian*. Just what had her da intended with such a note? A shiver slipped down her spine as she contemplated the possessive sound of the words. Why would Grimm Roderick respond to such a strange missive? He'd tortured her ceaselessly as a child and he'd rejected her as a young woman. He was an overbearing lout—who'd once been the hero of her every fantasy.

Now he was back at Caithness, and that was simply unacceptable. Regardless of her da's reasons for summoning him, he simply had to go. If her guards wouldn't remove him, she would—even if it meant at sword point, and she knew just where to find a sword. A massive claymore hung above the hearth in the Greathall; it would do nicely.

Her resolve firm, her gown fastened, Jillian marched out of her chambers. She was ready to confront him; her body was bristling with indignation. He had no right to be here, and she was just the person to explain that to him. He'd left once before when she'd begged him to stay—he couldn't arbitrarily decide to come back now. Snatching her hair back, she secured it with a velvet ribbon and made for the Greathall, moving briskly down the long corridor.

She drew to a sudden halt at the balustrade outside the solar, alarmed by the rumble of masculine voices below.

"What did your message say, Ramsay?" Jillian heard Grimm ask.

Their voices floated up, carrying clearly in the open Greathall. The tapestries were currently down for a cleaning, so the words reverberated off the stone walls.

"Said the lord and his lady would be leaving Caithness and called upon an old debt I owe him. He said he wished me to oversee his demesne while he was not here to do it himself."

Jillian peeked surreptitiously over the balustrade and saw Grimm sitting with two men near the main hearth. For an eternal moment she simply couldn't take her eyes off him. Angrily she jerked her gaze away and studied the newcomers. One of the men was tossed back in his chair as if he owned the keep and half the surrounding countryside. Upon closer scrutiny, Jillian decided he would likely act as if he owned any place he deigned to be. He was a study in black from head to toe: black hair, tanned skin, clad in a length of black wool that was unbroken by even one thread of color. Definitely hulking Highland blood, she concluded. A thin scar extended from his jaw to just below his eye.

Her eyes drifted over the second man. "Quinn," she whispered. She hadn't seen Quinn de Moncreiffe since he'd fostered with Grimm under her father years ago. Tall, golden and breathtakingly handsome, Quinn de Moncreiffe had comforted her on the many occasions Grimm had chased her away. In the years since she'd last seen him he had matured into a towering man with wide shoulders, a trim waist, and long blond hair pulled back in a queue.

"It would seem just about every man in Scotia and half of England is indebted to Gibraltar St. Clair for one thing or another," Quinn observed.

Ramsay Logan folded his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair, nodding. "Aye. He bailed me out of more than a few tight spaces when I was a younger lad and more prone to thinking with the wee head."

"Och, so you think you've changed, Logan?" Quinn provoked.

"Not so much that I couldn't knock you senseless still, de Moncreiffe," Ramsay shot back.

Ramsay Logan, Jillian mused; she'd been right about his bloodline. The Logans were indeed Highlanders. Ramsay certainly looked like one of those savage mountain men whose notoriety was exceeded only by their massive holdings. They were a land-rich clan, owning a large portion of the southern Highlands. Her eyes crept back to Grimm, despite her best intentions. He relaxed in his chair regally, composed as a king and acting as if he had every bit as much right to be there. Her eyes narrowed.

The corners of Grimm's mouth twitched faintly. "It's like old times with the two of you poking at each other, but spare me your dissension. There's a puzzle here. Why did Gibraltar St. Clair summon the three of us to Caithness? I've heard of no trouble here in years. Quinn, what did your message say? That he needed you to serve Caithness in his absence?"

Above them, Jillian frowned. That was a good question—why *would* her parents bring these three men to Caithness while they attended their grandson's christening? Hatchard, Caithness's chief man-at-arms, commanded a powerful force of guards, and there hadn't been trouble in these parts of the Lowlands for years.

"It said that he wished me to watch over Caithness in his absence, and if I couldn't take the time away from my ships to come for him, I should come for Jillian. I found his message rather odd but got the impression he was worried about Jillian, and truth be told, I've missed the lass," Quinn replied.

Jillian jerked. What was her deceitful da up to?

"Jillian—the Goddess-Empress herself." Ramsay flashed a wolfish grin.

Jillian's nostrils flared and her spine stiffened.

"What?" Grimm looked puzzled.

"He's referring to her much-lauded reputation. Didn't you stop at the stables when you rode in?" When Grimm shook his head, Quinn snorted. "You missed an earful. The lads there prattled on and on about her before we even had a chance to dismount, warning us not to defile her 'saintly' mien. The 'Goddess-Empress Jillian,' one of the young lads called her, saying mere 'Queen' was too commonplace."

"Jillian?" Grimm looked dubious.

Jillian glared at the top of his head.

"Bespelled," Ramsay affirmed. "The lot of them. One lad told me she's the second Madonna, and he believes if she bears children, it will surely be the product of divine intervention."

"I must say, any intervention with Jillian would be divine," Quinn said, grinning.

"Aye, right between those divine thighs of hers. Did you ever see a lass more well fashioned for a man's pleasure?" Ramsay kicked his feet up on the hearth and shifted in his chair, dropping his hands in his lap.

Jillian's eyebrows climbed her forehead, and she placed a hand over her mouth.

Grimm glanced sharply at Ramsay and Quinn. "Wait a minute—what do you mean by 'her divine thighs'? You've never met Jillian, have you? You doona even know what she looks like. And Quinn, *you* haven't seen her since she was a wee lass."

Quinn looked away uncomfortably.

"Does she have golden hair?" Ramsay countered. "Masses of it, falling in waves past her hips? Flawless face and about yay-tall?" He held his hand slightly above his seated head to demonstrate. "Is her bedroom on the second floor, facing due east?"

Grimm nodded warily.

"I *do* know what she looks like. Quinn and I saw her in a window as we rode in," Ramsay informed him.

Jillian groaned softly, hoping he wouldn't continue.

Ramsay continued, "If she's the woman who was changing her gown, the one with the breasts a man could—"

Jillian's hands flew protectively to her bodice. *It's a little late for that*, she rued.

"You did *not* see her getting dressed," Grimm growled, glancing at Quinn for reassurance.

"No," Ramsay supplied helpfully, "we saw her undressed. Framed in the window, sun spilling over the most splendid morning gown of rosy skin I've ever seen. Face of an angel, creamy thighs, and everything golden in between."

Mortification steeped Jillian in a furious blush from the crown of her head to her recently viewed breasts. They *had* seen her; all of her.

"Is that true, Quinn?" Grimm demanded.

Quinn nodded, looking sheepish. "Hell, Grimm, what did you expect me to do? Look away? She's stunning. I'd long suspected the wee lass would ripen into a lovely woman, but I'd never imagined such exquisite charms. Although Jillian always seemed like a younger sister to me, after I saw her today..." He shook his head and whistled admiringly. "Well, feelings can change."

"I didn't know Gibraltar had such a daughter," Ramsay hastened to add, "or I'd have been sniffing around years ago—"

"She's not the sniffing around kind. She's the marrying kind," Grimm snapped.

"Aye, she is the marrying kind, and the keeping kind, and the bedding kind," Ramsay said coolly. "The dolts at Caithness may be intimidated by her beauty, but I'm not. A woman like that needs a flesh-and-blood man."

Quinn shot Ramsay an irritated look and rose to his feet. "Exactly what are you saying, Logan? If any man is going to be speaking for her, it should be me. I've known Jillian since she was a child. My message specifically mentioned coming for Jillian, and after seeing her, I intend to do *precisely* that."

Ramsay came to his feet slowly, unfolding his massive frame until he stood a good two inches above Quinn's six-foot-plus frame. "Perhaps the only reason *my*

message wasn't worded the same way is because St. Clair knew I'd never met her. Regardless, it's past time I take a wife, and I intend to give the lovely lass an option besides hanging her nightrail—if she ever wears one, although I'm certainly not complaining—beside some common Lowland farmer."

"Who's calling who a farmer here? I am a bleeding merchant and worth more than all your paltry skinny-ass, shaggy-haired cows put together."

"Pah! My skinny-ass cows aren't where I get my wealth, you Lowland skivvy—"

"Aye, raiding innocent Lowlanders, more likely!" Quinn cut him off. "And what the hell is a skivvy?"

"Not a word a *flatlander* would know," Ramsay snapped.

"Gentlemen, please." Hatchard entered the Greathall, an expression of concern on his face. Having served as chief man-at-arms for twenty years, he could foresee a battle brewing half a county away, and this one was simmering beneath his nose. "There's no need to get into a brawl over this. Hold your tongues and bide a wee, for I have a message for you from Gibraltar St. Clair. And do sit down." He gestured to the chairs clustered near the hearth. "It's been my experience that men who are facing off rarely listen well."

Ramsay and Quinn continued to glare at each other.

Jillian tensed and nearly poked her head through the spindles of the balustrade. What was her father up to this time? Shrewd, red-haired Hatchard was her father's most trusted advisor and longtime friend. His vulpine features were an accurate reflection of his cleverness; he was canny and quick as a fox. His long, lean fingers tapped the hilt of his sword as he waited impatiently for the men to obey his command. "*Sit*," Hatchard repeated forcefully.

Ramsay and Quinn reluctantly eased back into their chairs.

"I'm pleased to see you've all arrived promptly," Hatchard said in an easier tone. "But, Grimm, why is your horse wandering the bailey?"

Grimm spoke softly. "He doesn't like to be penned. Is there a problem with that?"

Like man, like horse. Jillian rolled her eyes.

"No, no problem with me. But if he starts eating Jillian's flowers, you may have a bit of a skirmish on your hands." Hatchard lowered himself into a vacant chair, amused.

"Actually, I suspect you're going to have a bit of a skirmish on your hands no matter what you do with your horse Grimm Roderick." He chuckled. "It's good to see you again. It's been too long. Perhaps you could train with my men while you're here."

Grimm nodded curtly. "So why has Gibraltar summoned us here, Hatchard?"

"I'd planned to allow you all to settle in a bit before I passed on his message, but the lot of you are already onto the right of it. St. Clair did bring you here for his daughter," Hatchard admitted, rubbing his short red beard thoughtfully.

"I knew it," Ramsay said smugly.

Jillian hissed softly. *How dare he?* More suitors, and among them the very man she had vowed to hate until death. Grimm Roderick. How many men would he da throw at her before he finally accepted that she would not wed unless she found the kind of love her parents shared?

Hatchard leaned back in his chair and regarded the men levelly. "He expects she will choose one of you before they return from their visit, which gives the lot of you till late autumn to woo her."

"And if she doesn't?" Grimm asked.

"She will." Ramsay folded his arms across his chest, a portrait of arrogance.

"Does Jillian know about this?" Grimm asked quietly.

"Aye, is she duplicitous or is she an innocent?" Quinn quipped.

"And if she is innocent, to what degree?" Ramsay asked wickedly. "I, for one, intend to find out at the earliest opportunity."

"Over my dead body, Logan," Quinn growled.

"So be it." Ramsay shrugged.

"Well, whatever he intended, I don't think it was for the three of you to be killing each other over her." Hatchard smiled faintly. "He merely intends to see her wed before she passes another birthday, and one of you shall be the man. And no, Grimm, Jillian doesn't know a thing about it. She'd likely flee Caithness immediately if she had the vaguest inkling what her father was up to. Gibraltar has brought dozens of suitors to Jillian over the past year, and she drove them all away with one shenanigan or another. She and her da relished outwitting each another; the more unusual his ploy, the more inventive her reaction. Although, I must say, she always handled things with a certain delicacy and subtlety only a Sacheron woman can effect. Most of the men had no idea they'd been... er... for lack of a better word... duped. Like her father, Jillian can be the very image of propriety while planning a mutinous rebellion behind her composed face. One of you must court and win her, because the three of you are Gibraltar's last hopes."

Impossible, Jillian silently argued her case with shaky conviction. Her da would not do this to her. Would he? Even as she denied it, the long, considering glances her da had been giving her before he'd left surfaced in her mind. Suddenly his somewhat guilty expression, his last-minute hugs before he'd left made sense to Jillian. By the saints, as dispassionately as he matched his broodmares, her da had locked her in the stables with three hot-blooded studs and gone visiting.

Make that two hot-blooded studs and one cold, arrogant, impossible heathen, she amended silently. For surely as the sun rose and set, Grimm Roderick wouldn't deign to touch her even with someone else's hands. Jillian's shoulders slumped.

As if he'd somehow read her mind, Grimm Roderick's words drifted up, inciting more of that witless fury she suffered in his presence.

"Well, you doona have to worry about me, lads, for I wouldn't wed the woman if she was the last woman in all of Scotia. So it's up to the two of you to make Jillian a husband."

Jillian clenched her jaw and fled down the corridor before she could succumb to a mad urge to fling herself over the balustrade, a hissing female catapult of teeth and nails.

CHAPTER 4

MALDEBANN CASTLE THE HIGHLANDS, ABOVE TULUTH

"MILORD, YOUR SON IS NEAR."

Ronin McIlloch surged to his feet, his blue eyes blazing. "He's coming here? Now?"

"No, milord. Forgive me, I did not mean to alarm you," Gilles corrected hastily. "He is at Caithness."

"Caithness," Ronin repeated. He exchanged glances with his men. Their gazes reflected concern, caution, and unmistakable hope. "Have you any idea why he's there?" Ronin asked.

"No. Shall we find out?"

"Dispatch Elliott, he blends in well. Discreetly, mind you," Ronin said. Softly he added, "My son is closer than he's come in years."

"Yes, milord. Think you he may come home?"

Ronin McIlloch smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. "The time is not yet right for his return. We still have work to do. Send with Elliott the young boy who draws. I want pictures, with great detail."

"Yes, milord."

"And Gilles?"

Gilles paused in the doorway.

"Has anything... changed?"

Gilles sighed and shook his head. "He still calls himself Grimm. And as nearly as our men have been able to ascertain, he has never bothered to ask if you're still alive. Nor has he ever once looked west to Maldebann."

Ronin inclined his head. "Thank you. That will be all, Gilles."

* * * * *

Jillian found Kaley dicing potatoes in the kitchen. Kaley Twillow was a motherly woman in her late thirties; her curvaceous body couched an equally spacious heart. Originally from England, she'd come to Caithness upon the reference of one of Gibraltar's friends when her husband had died. Maid, cook's assistant, confidante in place of a scheming mother—Kaley did it all. Jillian plunked down on the edge of a chair and said without preface, "Kaley, there's a thing I've been wondering."

"And what might that be, dear?" Kaley asked with a tender smile. She laid her knife aside. "As a rule, your questions are quite peculiar, but they are always interesting."

Jillian edged her chair nearer to the cutting block where Kaley stood, so the other servants in the busy kitchen wouldn't overhear. "What does it mean when a man 'comes for a woman'?" she whispered conspiratorially.

Kaley blinked rapidly. "Comes?" she echoed.

"Comes," Jillian affirmed.

Kaley retrieved her knife, clutching it like a small sword. "In just what context did you hear this phrase used?" she asked stiffly. "Was it in reference to you? Was it one of the guards? Who was the man?"

Jillian shrugged. "I overheard a man saying he was told to 'come for Jillian' and he planned to do just that, precisely to the letter. I don't understand. He already did it—he came here."

Kaley thought a moment, then chortled, relaxing visibly. "It wouldn't have been the mighty, golden Quinn, would it, Jillian?"

Jillian's blush was reply enough for Kaley.

She calmly replaced her knife on the cutting board. "It means, dear lass"—Kaley bent her head close to Jillian's—"that he plans to bed you."

"Oh!" Jillian flinched, eyes wide. "Thank you, Kaley." She excused herself

crisply.

Kaley's eyes sparkled as Jillian beat a hasty retreat from the kitchen. "A fine man. Lucky lass."

* * * * *

As she raced for her chambers, Jillian seethed. While she could appreciate her parents' desire to see her wed, it was their fault as much as hers that she wasn't. They hadn't started encouraging her until last year, and shortly thereafter they'd dumped a barrage of candidates upon her with no warning. One by one, Jillian had brilliantly discouraged them by convincing them she was an unattainable paragon, not to be considered in a carnal, worldly sense—a woman better suited for the cloister than the marriage bed. A declaration of such intent had cooled the ardor of several of her suitors.

If cool civility and frigid reserve failed, she hinted at a family disposition toward madness that sent men scurrying. She'd had to resort to that on only two occasions; apparently her pious act was pretty convincing. And why shouldn't it be? she brooded. She'd never done anything particularly daring or improper in her entire life, hence she'd acquired a reputation as "a truly good person."

"Yuck," she informed the wall. "Chisel that on my headstone. 'She was a truly good person, but she's dead now.' " Although her efforts to dissuade her suitors had been successful, she'd apparently failed to stop her parents from scheming to marry her off; they'd summoned three more suitors to Caithness and abandoned her to her own straits. Dire straits indeed, for Jillian knew these men were not the kind to be put off with a few cool words and an aloof demeanor. Nor would they likely accept her claims of inherited madness. These men were too confident, too bold... *oh, hell's bells*, she dusted off another childhood curse, they were far too masculine for any woman's peace of mind. And if she wasn't careful, these three men could cause her to reclaim all the childhood epithets she'd learned while skipping at the heels of Quinn and Grimm. Jillian was accustomed to gentle, modest men, men gelded by their own insecurities, not swaggering, uncut bulls who thought "insecure" meant an unstable fortress or a weak timber in a foundation.

Of the three men currently invading her home, the only one she might hope to persuade to consider her plight sympathetically was Quinn, and that was far from a certainty. The lad she'd known years ago was quite different from the

formidable man he'd become. Even at the far reaches of Caithness she'd heard of his reputation throughout Scotland as a relentless conqueror, both of trade and women. To top it off, if Kaley's interpretation could be trusted and Quinn had truly been making an innuendo about bedding her, his youthful protectiveness had matured into manly possessiveness.

Then there was the intrepid Ramsay Logan. Nobody had to convince Jillian the black-clad Ramsay was dangerous. He dripped peril from every pore.

Grimm Roderick was another matter. He would certainly not push for her hand, but his simple presence was bad enough. He was a constant reminder of the most painful and humiliating days of her life.

Three barbarians who had been hand-selected by her own da to seduce and marry her lurked in her home. What was she going to do? Although it appealed to her immensely, fleeing didn't make much sense. They'd only come after her, and she doubted she'd ever make it to one of her brother's homes before Hatchard's men caught up. Besides, she brooded, she would *not* leave her home just to get away from *him*.

How could her parents do this to her? Worse yet, how could she ever go downstairs again? Not only had two of the men seen her without a stitch of clothing on, they were obviously planning to pluck the overripe, or so her parents had concluded without so much as soliciting her opinion, berry of her virginity. Jillian squeezed her knees together protectively, dropped her head in her lap, and decided things couldn't get much worse.

* * * * *

It wasn't easy for Jillian to hide in her chambers all day. She wasn't the cowering sort. Nor, however, was she the foolish sort, and she knew she must have a plan before she subjected herself to the perils of her parents' nefarious scheme. As afternoon faded into evening and she'd yet to be struck by inspiration, she discovered she was feeling quite irritable. She hated being cooped up in her chambers. She wanted to play the virginal, she wanted to kick the first person she saw, she wanted to visit Zeke, she wanted to eat. She'd thought someone would appear by lunchtime, she'd been certain loyal Kaley would come check on her if she didn't arrive at dinner, but the maids didn't even appear to clean her chambers or light the fire. As the solitary hours passed, Jillian's ire increased. The angrier she became, the less objectively she considered her plight,

ultimately concluding she would simply ignore the three men and go about her life as if nothing was amiss.

Food was her priority now. Shivering in the chilly evening air, she donned a light but voluminous cloak and pulled the hood snug around her face. Perhaps if she met up with one of the oversized brutes the combination of darkness and concealing attire would grant her anonymity. It probably wouldn't fool Grimm, but the other two hadn't seen her with clothes *on* yet.

Jillian closed the door quietly and slipped into the hallway. She opted for the servants' staircase and carefully picked her way down the dimly lit, winding steps. Caithness was huge, but Jillian had played in every nook and cranny and knew the castle well; nine doors down and to the left was the kitchen, just past the buttery. She peered down the long corridor. Lit by flickering oil lamps, it was deserted, the castle silent. Where was everyone?

As she moved forward, a voice floated out of the darkness behind her. "Pardon, lass, but could you tell me where I might find the buttery? We've run short of whisky and there's not a maid about."

Jillian froze in mid-step, momentarily robbed of speech. How could all the maids disappear and that man appear the very instant she decided to sneak from her chambers?

"I asked you to leave, Grimm Roderick. What are you still doing here?" she said coolly.

"Is that you, Jillian?" He stepped closer, peering through the shadows.

"Have so many other women at Caithness demanded you depart that you're suffering confusion about my identity?" she asked sweetly, plunging her shaking hands into the folds of her cloak.

"I didn't recognize you beneath your hood until I heard you speak, and as to the women, you know how the women around here felt about me. I assume nothing has changed."

Jillian almost choked. He was as arrogant as he'd always been. She pushed her hood back irritably. The women had fallen all over him when he'd fostered here, lured by his dark, dangerous looks, muscled body, and absolute indifference.

Maids had thrown themselves at his feet, visiting ladies had offered him jewels and lodgings. It had been revolting to watch. "Well, you are older," she parried weakly. "And you know as a man gets older his good looks can suffer."

Grimm's mouth turned faintly upward as he stepped forward into the flickering light thrown off by a wall torch. Tiny lines at the corners of his eyes were whiter than his Highland-tanned face. If anything, it made him more beautiful.

"You are older too." He studied her through narrowed eyes.

"It's not nice to chide a woman about her age. I am *not* an old maid."

"I didn't say you were," he said mildly. "The years have made you a lovely woman."

"And?" Jillian demanded.

"And what?"

"Well, go ahead. Don't leave me hanging, waiting for the nasty thing you're going to say. Just say it and get it over with."

"What nasty thing?"

"Grimm Roderick, you have never said a single nice thing to me in all my life. So don't start faking it now."

Grimm's mouth twisted up at one corner, and Jillian realized that he still hated to smile. He fought it, begrudged it, and rarely did one ever break the confines of his eternal self-control. Such a waste, for he was even more handsome when he smiled, if that was possible.

He moved closer.

"Stop right there!"

Grimm ignored her command, continuing his approach.

"I said *stop*"

"Or you'll do what, Jillian?" His voice was smooth and amused. He cocked his head at a lazy angle and folded his arms across his chest.

"Why, I'll..." She belatedly acknowledged there wasn't much of anything she could do to prevent him from going anywhere he wished to go, in any manner he wished to go there. He was twice her size, and she'd never be his physical match. The only weapon she'd ever had against him was her sharp tongue, honed to a razor edge by years of defensive practice on this man.

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Tell me, lass, what will you do?"

Jillian made no reply, mesmerized by the intersection of his arms, the golden slopes of muscle flexing at his slightest movement. She had a sudden vision of his hard body stretched full length above hers, his lips curving, not with his customary infuriating condescension but with passion.

He sauntered nearer, until he stood mere inches from her. She swallowed hard and clasped her hands inside her cloak.

He lowered his head toward hers.

Jillian could not have moved if the stone walls of the corridor had started crumbling around her. If the floor had suddenly ruptured beneath her feet, she would have hung suspended on dreamy clouds of fantasy. Mesmerized, she stared up into his brilliant eyes, fascinated by the silky dark lashes, the smooth tan of his skin, the aquiline, arrogant nose, the sensual curved lips, the cleft in his chin. He leaned closer, his breath fanning her cheek. *Was he going to kiss her? Could it be Grimm Roderick might actually kiss her? Had he truly responded to her da's summons—for her?* Her knees felt weak. He cleared his throat, and she trembled with anticipation. What would he do? Would he ask her permission?

"So where, milady, pray tell, is the buttery?" His lips brushed her ear. "I believe this ridiculous conversation began by my saying we're out of whisky and there's not a maid about. Whisky, lass," he repeated in a voice oddly roughened. "We men need a drink. Ten minutes have passed and I'm no closer to finding it."

Kiss her, indeed. When pine martens curled up on the hearth like sleepy cats. Jillian glared at him. "One thing has not changed, Grimm Roderick, and don't you ever forget it. I still hate you."

Jillian pushed past him, retreating once again to the safety of her chambers.



CHAPTER 5

THE MOMENT JILLIAN OPENED HER EYES THE NEXT morning, she panicked. Had he left because she'd been so hateful?

He's supposed to leave, she reminded herself grimly. She *wanted* him to leave. Didn't she? Her brow furrowed as she pondered the illogical duality of her feelings. As far back as she could recall, she'd always suffered this vacillation where Grimm was concerned: hating him one moment, adoring him the next, but always wanting him near. If he hadn't been so unkind to her she would have consistently adored him, but he'd made it painfully clear that her adoration was the last thing he wanted. And that obviously hadn't changed. From the first moment she'd met Grimm Roderick, she'd been hopelessly drawn to him. But after years of being brushed away, ignored, and finally abandoned, she'd given up her childhood fantasies.

Or had she? Perhaps that was precisely her fear: Now that he was back she would make the same mistakes again and behave like an adolescent fool over the magnificent warrior he had become.

Dressing quickly, she snatched up her slippers and hastened for the Greathall. As she entered the room, she halted abruptly. "Oh, my," she murmured. Somehow she'd managed to forget there were three men in her home, so consumed had she been with thoughts of Grimm. They gathered near the fire, while several maids cleared dozens of platters and dishes from the massive table centered in the Greathall. Yesterday, safe behind the balustrade, Jillian had been struck by how tall and broad the three of them were. Today, standing only a few feet from them, she felt like a dwarf willow in a forest of mighty oaks. Each man stood at least a foot taller than she did. It was downright intimidating to a woman who was not easily intimidated. Her gaze wandered from one man to the next.

Ramsay Logan was an inch short of terrifying. Quinn was no longer the stripling son of a Lowland chieftain, but a powerful laird in his own right. And Grimm was the only man not looking at her; he stood gazing intently into the fire. She took advantage of his distraction and studied his profile with greedy eyes.

"Jillian." Quinn moved forward to greet her.

She forced herself to drag her gaze away from Grimm and concentrate on what Quinn was saying. "Welcome, Quinn." She pasted a cheerful smile on her lips.

"It's so good to see you again, lass." Quinn took her hands in his and smiled down at her. "It's been years and... och, but the years have been generous to you—you're breathtaking!"

Jillian blushed and glanced at Grimm, who was paying no heed to the conversation. She stifled the urge to kick him and make him notice that someone thought she was lovely. "You've changed yourself, Quinn," she said brightly. "It's no wonder I've heard your name linked with one beautiful woman after another."

"And just where would you be hearing that, lass?" Quinn asked softly.

"Caithness isn't exactly the end of the earth, Quinn. We do get visitors here on occasion."

"And you've asked them about me?" Quinn probed, interested.

Behind him, Ramsay cleared his throat impatiently.

Jillian sneaked another glance at Grimm. "Of course I have. And Da always likes to hear about the lads he fostered," she added.

"Well, although I wasn't fostered here, your father *did* ask me to come. That must count for something," Ramsay grumbled, trying to jostle Quinn aside. "And if this dolt would recall his manners, perhaps he'd see fit to introduce me to the loveliest woman in all of Scotland."

Jillian thought she heard Grimm make a choking sound. Her gaze flew to him, but he hadn't moved a muscle and still appeared oblivious to the conversation.

Quinn snorted. "Not that I don't agree with his assessment of you, Jillian, but beware this Highlander's tongue. He's got quite a reputation with the lasses himself." Reluctantly he turned to Ramsay. "Jillian, I'd like you to meet—"

"Ramsay Logan," Ramsay interrupted, thrusting himself forward. "Chieftain of the largest keep in the Highlands and—"

"My ass, you are." Quinn snorted. "The Logan scarcely has a pot to"—he broke off and cleared his throat—"cook in."

Ramsay jostled him aside and moved into his place.

"Give it up, de Moncreiffe, she's not interested in a Lowlander."

"*I'm* a Lowlander," Jillian reminded.

"Merely by birth, not by choice, and marriage could correct that." Ramsay stepped as close to Jillian as he could without actually standing on her toes.

"Lowlanders are the civilized lot of the Scots, Logan. And quit crowding her, you're going to back her right out of the hall."

Jillian smiled gratefully at Quinn, then flinched as Grimm finally looked sidewise at her.

"Jillian," he said quietly, nodding in her general direction before turning back to the fire.

How could he affect her so intensely? All the man had to do was say her name, one word, and Jillian was unable to form a coherent sentence. And there were so many questions she wanted to ask him—years and years of "whys." *Why did you leave me? Why did you hate me? Why couldn't you adore me like I adore you?*

"Why?" Jillian demanded before she knew she'd opened her mouth.

Ramsay and Quinn gazed at her, puzzled, but she only had eyes for Grimm.

She stomped over to the fire and poked Grimm in the shoulder. "Why? Would you just tell me that? For once and for all, why?"

"Why what, Jillian?" Grimm didn't turn.

She poked him harder. "You know 'why what.'"

Grimm glanced reluctantly over his shoulder. "Really, Jillian, I haven't the faintest idea what you're blathering about." Ice-blue eyes met hers, and for a moment she thought she glimpsed a blatant dare in them. It shocked her to her senses.

"Don't be ridiculous, Grimm. It's a simple question. Why have the three of you come to Caithness?" Jillian quickly salvaged the remnants of her pride. They

didn't know she'd overheard her father's despicable scheme, and she'd soon discover if any of them would be honest with her.

Grimm's eyes flickered strangely; in another man Jillian might have called it disappointment, but not in his. He scanned her from head to toe, noting the slippers clutched in her hands. When he looked at her bare toes she curled them under her gown, feeling oddly vulnerable, as if she were six again.

"Put your slippers on, lass. You'll catch a chill." Jillian glared at him.

Quinn moved to her side and offered his arm for her to lean on while she donned her slippers. "He's right. The stones are cold, lass. As to the why of it, your da summoned us to look after Caithness in his absence, Jillian."

"Really?" Jillian said sweetly, adding "liar" to the list of nasty names she was calling men in the privacy of her thoughts. She stuffed one foot in a slipper, then the next. She doubted Grimm would care if she died of a chill. *Put your slippers on*, he ordered, as if she were an unruly toddler who couldn't complete the simple task of dressing herself. "Is there trouble expected in these parts of the Lowlands?"

"It's better to be safe than sorry, lass." Ramsay offered the platitude with his most charming smile.

Safe, my arse, she thought mulishly. Safe certainly wasn't this, surrounded by circling warriors who were inflamed by the mere scent of a woman.

"Your da didn't wish to take the chance trouble might befall Caithness in his absence, and now seeing you, lass, I understand his concern," Ramsay added smoothly. "I'd select only the finest to protect you too."

"I'm all the protection she needs, Logan," Quinn said dryly. He took her by the hand and led her to the table. "Bring breakfast for the lady," he instructed a maid.

"Protection from what?" Jillian asked.

"From yourself, most likely." Grimm's voice was low but still carried clearly in the stone hall.

"*What* did you just say?" Jillian whirled around in her seat. Any excuse for an

argument with him was a welcome excuse.

"I said protection from yourself, brat." Grimm met her gaze with a heated one of his own. "You're forever walking into danger. Like when you wandered off with the tinkers. We couldn't find you for *two days*."

Quinn laughed. "By Odin's spear, I'd forgotten about that. We were nearly mad with worry. I finally found you north of Dunrieffe—'

"I would have found her if you hadn't insisted I go south, Quinn. I told you they'd gone north," Grimm reminded him.

Quinn glanced sideways at Grimm. "Hell's bells, man, don't brood about it. She was found, and that's all that matters."

"I wasn't lost to begin with," Jillian informed them. "I knew exactly where I was."

The men laughed.

"And I am not always getting into danger. I just wanted to feel the freedom of the tinkers. I was old enough—"

"You were thirteen!" Grimm snapped.

"I was fully in control of myself!"

"You were misbehaving as usual," Quinn teased.

"Jillian never misbehaves," Kaley murmured as she entered the room and caught the last of the conversation. She placed a steaming platter of sausage and potatoes in front of Jillian.

"A shame, if it's true," Ramsay purred.

"Then there was the time she got stuck in the pigpen. Remember that one, Grimm?" Quinn laughed, and even Grimm couldn't begrudge him a smile. "Remember how . she looked, backed into the corner, jabbering away to the enraged mama pig?" Quinn snorted. "I swear Jillian was squealing louder than the sow was."

Jillian leapt to her feet. "That's quite enough. And quit smiling, Kaley."

"I'd forgotten that one myself, Jillian." Kaley chuckled. "You were a handful."

Jillian grimaced. "I'm not a child anymore. I'm twenty-one years old—"

"And why is it that you haven't wed, lass?" Ramsay wondered aloud.

Silence descended as all eyes, including several curious maids', focused on Jillian. She stiffened, mortification staining her cheeks with a flush of pink. By the saints, these men held nothing back. Not one of her past suitors would have dared such a direct frontal attack, but these men, she reminded herself grimly, weren't like any men she'd ever known before. Even Grimm and Quinn were unknown variables; they'd become dangerously unpredictable.

"Well, why haven't you?" Quinn said softly. "You're beautiful, witty, and well landed. Where are all your suitors, lass?"

Where, indeed? Jillian mused.

Grimm turned from the fire slowly. "Yes, Jillian, tell us. Why *haven't* you wed?"

Jillian's eyes flew to his. For a long moment she was unable to free herself from the snare of his gaze and the strange emotions it incited in her. With an immense effort of will, she averted her gaze. "Because I'm joining the cloister. Didn't Da tell you?" she said cheerfully. "That's probably why he brought you all here, to escort me safely to the Sisters of Gethsemane come fall." She studiously ignored Kaley's reproachful look and plunked down in her seat, attacking her breakfast with newly discovered relish. Let them chew on that. If they wouldn't admit the truth, why should she?

"Cloister?" Quinn said after a stunned silence.

"The nunnery," she clarified.

"As in wed to the Christ and none other?" Ramsay groaned.

"As in," Jillian confirmed around a mouthful of sausage.

Grimm didn't say a word as he left the Greathall.

* * * * *

A few hours later Jillian was wandering the outer bailey, quite aimlessly, certainly not of a mind to wonder where one specific man might have gotten off to, when Kaley ducked out the back entrance of the castle just as she passed.

"The cloister, is it? Really, Jillian," Kaley reprimanded.

"By the saints, Kaley, they were telling stories about me!"

"Charming stories."

"Humiliating stories." Jillian's cheeks colored.

"Endearing stories. True stories, not outrageous fibs like you told."

"Kaley, they're men," Jillian said, as if that should explain everything.

"Mighty fine men, at that, lass. Your da brings the cream of the crop here for you to choose a husband, and you go and tell them you're destined for a nunnery."

"You knew my da brought them here for that?"

Kaley flushed.

"How did you know?"

Kaley looked embarrassed. "I was eavesdropping from the solar when you were spying over the balustrade. You really must stop doffing your clothes in front of the window, Jillian," she chided.

"I didn't do it on purpose, Kaley." Jillian pursed her lips and scowled. "For a moment I thought Mother and Da had told you, even though they hadn't told me."

"No, lass. They didn't tell anyone. And maybe they were a bit heavy-handed, but you can approach this in one of two ways: You can be angry and spiteful and ruin your chances, or you can thank Providence and your da for fetching you the best of the best, Jillian."

Jillian rolled her eyes. "If those men are the best, then it's the cloister for certain."

"Jillian, come on, lass. Don't fight what's best for you. Choose a man and quit

being mulish."

"I don't want a man." Jillian seethed.

Kaley measured her a long moment. "What are you doing wandering around out here, anyway?"

"Enjoying the flowers." Jillian shrugged nonchalantly.

"Don't you usually ride in the morning, then go to the village?"

"I didn't feel like it this morning. Is that a crime?" Jillian said peevishly.

Kaley's lip twitched in a smile. "Speaking of riding, I believe I saw that handsome Highlander Ramsay down by the stables."

"Good. I hope he gets trampled. Although I'm not certain there's a horse tall enough. Perhaps he could lie upon the ground and make it easier."

Kaley searched Jillian's face intently. "Quinn told me he was going to the village to fetch some whisky from MacBean."

"I hope he drowns in it," Jillian said, then looked at Kaley hopefully.

"Well," Kaley drawled, "I guess I'll be heading back to the kitchens. There's a lot of food to cook for these men." The voluptuous maid turned her back on Jillian and started walking away.

"Kaley!"

"What?" Kaley blinked innocently over her shoulder.

Jillian's eyes narrowed. "Innocent doesn't suit you, Kaley."

"Peevish doesn't suit you, Jillian."

Jillian flushed. "I'm sorry. So?" she encouraged.

Kaley shook her head, chuckling softly. "I'm sure you don't care, but Grimm's gone to the loch. Looked to me like he planned to do some washing."

The moment Kaley was gone, Jillian glanced around to make certain no one was

watching, then doffed her slippers and raced for the loch.

* * * * *

Jillian ducked behind the rock and watched him.

Grimm was crouched at the edge of the loch, scrubbing his shirt with two smooth rocks. With a castle full of servants and maids to do the washing, the mending, his every bidding—even rush to his bed if he so much as crooked a seductive finger—Grimm Roderick walked to the loch, selected stones, and washed his own shirt. What pride. What independence. What... isolation.

She wanted to wash the worn linen for him. No, she wanted to wash the muscled chest the soft linen caressed. She wanted to trace her hands over the ridges of muscle that laced his abdomen and follow that silky dark trail of hair where it dipped beneath his kilt. She wanted to be welcomed into his solitary confinement and release the man she was convinced had deliberately walled himself behind a facade of chill indifference.

One knee in the grass, his leg bent beneath him, he scrubbed the shirt gently. Jillian watched the muscles in his shoulders flexing. He was more beautiful than any man had the right to be, with his great height and perfectly conditioned body, his black hair restrained by a leather thong, his piercing eyes.

I adore you, Grimm Roderick. How many times had she said those words safely in the private chambers of her head? *Loved you since the day I first saw you. Been waiting for you to notice me ever since.* Jillian dropped to the moss behind the rock, folded her arms on the stone, and rested her chin upon them, watching him hungrily. His back was bathed golden by the sun, and his wide shoulders tapered to a trim waist, where his kilt hugged his hips. His plunged a hand into his thick, dark hair, pushing it out of his face, and Jillian expelled a breath as his muscles rippled.

He turned and looked directly at her. Jillian froze. Damn his acute hearing! He'd always had unnatural senses. How could she have forgotten?

"Go away, peahen." He returned his attention to the shirt he was washing.

Jillian closed her eyes and dropped her head on her hands in defeat. She couldn't even get to the point where she worked up the courage to try to talk to him, to

reach him. The moment she started thinking mushy thoughts, the bastard said something remote and biting and it deflated the sails of her resolve before she'd even lifted anchor. She sighed louder, indulging in a generous dose of self-pity.

He turned and looked at her again. "What?" he demanded.

Jillian lifted her head irritably. "What do you mean, 'what'? I didn't say anything to you."

"You're sitting back there sighing as if the world's about to end. You're making so much noise I can't even scrub my shirt in peace, and then you have the gall to get snippy with me when I politely inquire as to what you're mooning about."

"Politely inquire?" she echoed. "You call a barely grunted and entirely put-upon-sounding 'what' a polite inquiry? A 'what' that says 'how dare you invade my space with your pitiful sounds?' A 'what' that says 'could you please go die somewhere else, peahen?' Grimm Roderick, you don't know the first damned thing about polite."

"There's no need to be cursing, peahen," he said mildly.

"I am *not* a peahen."

He tossed a scathing look over his shoulder. "Yes, you are. You're always pecking away at something. Peck-peck, peck-peck."

"Pecking?" Jillian shot to her feet, leapt the stone, and faced Grimm. "I'll show you pecking." Quick as a cat, she plucked the shirt from his hands, twisted her hands in the fabric, and ripped it down the center. She found the sound of the cloth tearing perversely satisfying. "That's what I really feel like doing. How's *that* for invading your space? And why are you washing your own stupid shut in the first place?" She glared at him, flapping the tails of his shirt to punctuate her words.

Grimm sat back on his heels, eyeing her warily. "Are you feeling all right?"

"No, I am not feeling all right. I haven't been feeling all right all morning. And stop trying to change the subject and turn it around on me, like you always do. Answer my question. Why are you washing your own shirt?"

"Because it was dirty," he replied with calculated condescension.

She ignored it with admirable restraint. "There are maids to wash—"

"I didn't wish to inconvenience—"

"The shirts of the men who—"

"A maid by asking her to wash—"

"And I would have washed the stupid thing for you anyway!"

Grimm's mouth snapped shut.

"I mean, that is... well, I would have if... if all the maids were dead or taken grievously ill and there was no one else who could"—she shrugged—"and it was the only shirt you owned... and bitterly cold... and you were sick yourself or something." She snapped her mouth shut, realizing there was no way out of the verbal quagmire into which she'd leapt. Grimm was staring at her with fascination.

He rose to his feet in one swift graceful motion. Mere inches separated them.

Jillian resented having to tilt her head back to look up at him, but her resentment was quickly replaced by a breathless awareness of the man. She was mesmerized by his proximity, riveted by the intense way he was eyeing her. Had he moved even closer? Or had she leaned into him?

"*You* would have washed my shirt?" His eyes searched hers intently.

Jillian gazed at him in silence, not trusting herself to speak. If she opened her mouth, God only knew what might come out. *Kiss me, you big beautiful warrior.*

When he brushed her tense jaw with the back of his knuckles, she nearly swooned. Her skin tingled where his fingers had passed. His lips were a breath away from hers, his eyes were heavy-lidded and unfathomable.

He wanted to kiss her. Jillian felt certain of it.

She tilted her head to receive his kiss. Her lids fluttered shut, and she gave herself fully over to fantasy. His breath fanned her cheek, and she waited, afraid

to move a muscle.

"Well, it's too late now."

Her eyes flew open. *No, it's not*, she nearly snapped. *Kiss me*.

"To wash it, I mean." His gaze dropped to the tattered shirt she still held.

"Besides," he added, "I doona need some silly peahen fussing over me. At least the maids doona rip my shirts, unless of course they're in a hurry to remove them from my body, but that's an entirely different discussion which is neither here nor there, and one I'm sure you wouldn't be interested in having with me anyway..."

"Grimm?" Jillian said tightly.

He looked out over the loch. "Um?"

"I hate you."

"I know, lass," he said softly. "You told me that last night. It seems all our little'discussions' end on those words. Try to be a bit more creative, will you?"

He didn't move a muscle when the remains of his wet shirt slapped him in the face and Jillian stomped away.

* * * * *

Grimm came to dinner wearing a clean tartan. His hair was wet, slicked back from a recent bath, and his shirt was ripped cleanly in two down the center of his back. The loose ends flapped above his tartan, and entirely too much muscled back could be seen for Jillian's comfort.

"What happened to your shirt, Grimm?" Quinn asked curiously.

Grimm gazed across the table at Jillian.

Jillian raised her head, intending to scowl self-righteously, but failed. He was looking at her with that strange expression she couldn't interpret, the one she'd seen when he'd first arrived and had kept saying her name—and she swallowed her angry words along with a bite of bread that had become impossibly dry. The man's face was flawlessly symmetrical. A shadow beard accentuated the hollows beneath his cheekbones, sharply defining his arrogant jaw. His wet hair, secured

by a thong, gleamed ebony in the flickering light. His blue eyes were brilliant against the backdrop of his tanned skin, and his white teeth flashed when he spoke. His lips were firm, pink, sensuous, and presently curved in a mocking expression.

"I had a run-in with an ill-tempered feline," Grimm said, holding her gaze.

"Well, why don't you change your shirt?" Ramsay asked.

"I brought only the one," Grimm told Jillian.

"You brought one shirt?" Ramsay snorted disbelievingly. "Odin's spear, Grimm, you can afford a thousand shirts. Becoming a miser, are you?"

"'Tis not the shirt that makes the man, Logan."

"Damn good thing for you." Ramsay carefully straightened the folds of his snowy linen. "Have you considered that it may be a reflection of him?"

"I'm sure a maid can mend it for you," Quinn said. "Or I can lend you one."

"I doona mind wearing it this way. As for reflections, who's to see?"

"You look like a villein, Roderick." Ramsay sneered.

Jillian made a resigned sound. "I'll mend it," she muttered, dropping her gaze to her plate so she didn't have to see their stunned expressions.

"You can sew, lass?" Ramsay asked doubtfully.

"Of course I can sew. I'm not a complete failure as a woman just because I'm old and unwed," Jillian snapped.

"But don't the maids do that?"

"Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't," Jillian replied cryptically.

"Are you feeling all right, Jillian?" Quinn asked.

"Oh, will you just hush up?"

CHAPTER 6

IT INFURIATED HER. EVERY TIME SHE GLIMPSED THE LINE of uneven stitches puckering the center of Grimm's shirt, she felt herself turning into an irascible, beady-eyed porcupine. It was as humiliating as if he'd stitched the words "Jillian lost control of herself and I'm never going to let her forget it" across his back. She couldn't believe she'd torn it, but years of suffering his torment as a child had proved her undoing, and she'd simply snapped.

He was back at Caithness, he was hopelessly attractive, and he still treated her exactly the same as he had when she'd been a child. What would it take to make him see that she wasn't a child anymore? *Well, stop acting like one, to start with*, she remonstrated herself. Since the moment she'd tenderly mended his shirt, she'd been longing to waylay him, divest him of the pernicious reminder, and gleefully burn it. Doing so, however, would have reinforced his perception that she had a penchant for witless action, so instead she'd procured three shirts of finer linen, with flawless stitching, and instructed the maids to place them in his room. Did he wear them?

Nary a one.

Each day that dawned, he donned the same shirt with the ridiculous pleat down the back. She'd considered asking him why he wouldn't wear the new ones, but that would be as bad as admitting that his ploy to make her feel stupid and guilty was working. She'd die before she betrayed another ounce of emotion to the emotionless man who was sabotaging her impeccable manners.

Jillian dragged her eyes from the dark, seductive man walking in the bailey, wearing a badly mended shirt, and forced herself to take a deep, calming breath. *Jillian Alanna Roderick*; she rolled the name behind her teeth, a whisper of exhaled breath. The syllables tumbled euphonically. *I only wish...*

"So it's the cloister for you, eh, lass?"

Jillian stiffened. The throaty rumble of Ramsay Logan was not what she needed to hear at this moment. "Um-hmm," she mumbled in the direction of the window.

"You won't last a fortnight," he said matter-of-factly.

"How dare you?" Jillian whirled about to face him. "You don't know a thing about me!"

Ramsay smiled smugly.

Jillian blanched as she remembered that he'd seen her naked at the window the day he'd arrived. "I'll have you know that I have a calling."

"I'm sure you do, lass," Ramsay purred. "I simply think your ears are plugged and you're hearing the wrong one. A woman like you has a calling to a flesh-and-blood man, not a God who will never make you feel the joy of being a woman."

"There are finer things in life than being a man's broodmare, Logan."

"No woman of mine would ever be a broodmare. Don't misunderstand me: I don't belittle the Kirk and Christ's chosen, I simply don't see you being drawn to such a lure. You're too passionate."

"I am cool and collected," she insisted.

"Not around Grimm," Ramsay said pointedly.

"That's because he irritates me," Jillian snapped.

Ramsay cocked a brow and grinned.

"Just what do you think is so funny, Logan?"

"'Irritates' is an interesting word for it. Not the one I might have chosen. Rather, let's see... 'Excites'? 'Delights'? Your eyes burn like amber in the sunlight when he enters the room."

"Fine." Jillian turned back to the window. "Now that we've debated our choice of appropriate verbs, and you've selected all the wrong ones and obviously don't know a thing about women, you may continue on with your day. Shoo, shoo." She waved her hand at him.

Ramsay's grin widened. "I don't intimidate you a bit, do I, lass?"

"Aside from your overbearing attitude, and the fact that you use your great

height and girth to make a woman feel cornered, I suspect you're more bull than bully," she muttered.

"Most women like the bull in me." He moved closer. Jillian shot a disgusted look over her shoulder. "I'm not most women. And don't be standing on my toes, Logan, there's only room enough for me on them. You can trundle back home to the land of the mighty Logan, where the men are men and the women belong to them. I am not the kind of woman you're used to dealing with."

Ramsay laughed.

Jillian turned slowly, her jaw clenched.

"Would you like some help with Roderick?" He gazed over her shoulder, out the window.

"I thought we'd just established you're not a coldblooded murderer, which means you'd be of no use to me."

"I think you need help. That man can be dense as sod."

When the door to the Greathall opened a scant instant later, Ramsay moved so quickly that Jillian had no time to protest. His kiss was swiftly delivered and lingeringly prolonged. It raised her to her tiptoes and left her strangely breathless when he released her.

Jillian gazed at him blankly. Truth be told, she'd had so few kisses that she was grossly unprepared for the skillful kiss of a mature man and accomplished lover. She blinked.

The slam of the door caused the timbers to shudder, and Jillian understood. "Was that Grimm?" she breathed.

Ramsay nodded and grinned. When he started to lower his head again, Jillian hastily clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Come on, lass," he urged, catching her hand in his. "Grant me a kiss to thank me for showing Grimm that if he's too stupid to claim you, someone else will."

"Where do you get the idea I care what that man thinks?" She seethed. "And *he* certainly doesn't care if you kiss me."

"You're recovering from my kiss too fast for my liking, lass. As for Grimm, I saw you watching him through this window. If you don't speak your heart—"

"He has no heart to speak to."

"From what I saw at court I'd wager that's true, but you'll never know for certain until you try," Ramsay continued. "I'd just as soon you try, fail, and get it over with so you can start looking at me with such longing."

"Thank you for such brilliant advice, Logan. I can see by your own blissfully wedded state that you must know what you're talking about when it comes to relationships."

"The only reason I'm not blissfully wed is because I'm holding out for a good-hearted woman. They've become a rare commodity."

"It requires a good-hearted man to attract a good-hearted woman, and you've likely been looking in the wrong places. You won't find a woman's heart between her—" Jillian broke off abruptly, mortified by what she'd almost said.

Ramsay roared with laughter. "Tell me I could make you forget Grimm Roderick and I'll show a good-hearted man. I would treat you like a queen. Roderick doesn't deserve you."

Jillian sighed morosely. "He doesn't want me. And if you breathe one word to him about what you think I feel, which I assure you I don't, I shall find a way to make you miserable."

"Just don't be tearing my shirts." Ramsay raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. "I'm off to the village, lass." He ducked quickly out the door.

Jillian scowled at the closed door for a long moment after he'd gone. By the saints, these men were making her feel like she was thirteen again, and thirteen had not been a good year. A horrid year, come to think of it. The year she'd watched Grimm in the stables with a maid, then gone to stand in her room and gaze sadly at her body. Thirteen had been a miserable year of impossible duality, of womanly feelings in a child's body. Now she was exhibiting childish feelings in a woman's body. Would she ever gain her balance around that man?

* * * * *

Caithness. Once Grimm had considered the name interchangeable with "heaven." When he'd first arrived at Caithness at the age of sixteen, the golden child who "adopted" him had been lacking only filmy wings to complete the illusion that she could offer him angelic absolution. Caithness had been a place of peace and joy, but the joy had been tainted by a bottomless well of desire for things he knew could never be his. Although Gibraltar and Elizabeth had opened their door and their hearts to him, there had been an invisible barrier he'd been unable to surmount. Dining in the Greathall, he'd listened as the St. Clairs, their five sons, and single daughter had joked and laughed. They had taken such obvious delight in each step along the path of life, savoring each phase of their children's development. Grimm had been acutely aware of the fact that Caithness was not his home but another family's, and he was sheltered merely out of their generosity, not by right of birth.

Grimm expelled a breath of frustration. *Why?* he wanted to shout, shaking his fists at the sky. Why did it have to be Ramsay? Ramsay Logan was an incorrigible womanizer, lacking the tenderness and sincerity a woman like Jillian needed. He'd met Ramsay at court, years ago, and had witnessed more than a few broken hearts abandoned in the savage Highlander's charming wake. Why Ramsay? On the heels of that thought came a silent howl: *Why not me?* But he knew it could never be. *We canna help it, son... we're born this way.* Senseless killers—and worse, he was a Berserker to boot. Even without summoning the Berserker, his father had killed his own wife. What would the inherited sickness of the mind, coupled with being a Berserker, make him capable of? The only thing he knew with any degree of certainty was that he never wanted to find out.

Grimm buried both hands in his hair and stopped walking. He pulled his fingers through, loosening the thong and reassuring himself his hair was clean, not matted with dirt from living in the forests. He had no war braids plaited into the locks, he was not brown as a Moor from months of sun and infrequent bathing, he no longer looked as barbaric as he had the day Jillian found him in the woods. But somehow he felt as if he could never wash away the stains of those years he'd lived in the Highland forests, pitting his wits against the fiercest predators to scavenge enough food to stay alive. Perhaps it was the memory of shivering in the icy winters, when he had been grateful for the layer of dirt on his skin because it was one more layer between his body and the freezing temperatures. Perhaps it was the blood on his hands and the sure knowledge that if he was ever fool enough to let himself feel for anyone it might be his turn to come to

awareness with a knife in his hand and his own son watching.

Never. He would never hurt Jillian.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered. Jillian was a woman full grown now, and he had no defenses against her but his will. It had been his formidable will alone that had brought him this far. He'd trained himself, disciplined himself, learned to control the Berserker... for the most part.

When he'd ridden into the courtyard a few days ago and seen the golden, laughing woman surrounded by delighted children, regret for his lost childhood had almost suffocated him. He'd longed to insert himself into the picture on the gently sloping lawn, both as a child and as a man. Willingly he would have curled at her feet and listened, willingly he would have taken her in his arms and given her children of her own.

Frustrated by his inability to do either, he'd provoked her. Then she'd raised her head and Grimm had felt his heart plummet to the soles of his boots. It had been easier for him to recall her with a younger, innocent face. Now the saucily tilted nose and sparkling eyes were part of a sultry, sensual woman's features. And her eyes, although still innocent, held maturity and a touch of quiet sorrow. He wished he knew who had introduced that into her gaze, so he could hunt and kill the bastard.

Suitors? She'd likely had scores. Had she loved one? He shook his head. He didn't like that idea. So why had Gibraltar summoned him here? He didn't believe for a minute that it had anything to do with him being a contender for Jillian's hand. More likely Gibraltar had recalled the vow Grimm had made to protect Jillian if she ever needed it. And Gibraltar probably needed a warrior strong enough to prevent any possible trouble between Jillian and her two "real" suitors: Ramsay and Quinn. Aye, that made perfect sense to him. He'd be there to protect Jillian from being compromised in any way and to break up any potential disputes between her suitors.

Jillian: scent of honeysuckle and a mane of silky golden hair, eyes of rich brown with golden flecks, the very color of the amber the Vikings had prized so highly. They appeared golden in the sunlight but darkened to a simmering brown flecked with yellow when she was angry—which around him was all the time. She was his every waking dream, his every nocturnal fantasy. And he was

dangerous by his mere nature. A beast. "Milord, is something wrong?" Grimm dropped his hands from his face. The lad who'd been on Jillian's lap when he'd first arrived was tugging on his sleeve and squinting up at him.

"Are you all right?" the boy asked worriedly.

Grimm nodded. "I'm fine, lad. But I'm not a laird. You can call me Grimm."

"You look like a laird to me."

"Well, I'm not."

"Why doesn't Jillian like you?" Zeke asked.

Grimm shook his head, begrudging a rueful twist of his lips. "I suspect, Zeke—it is Zeke, isn't it?"

"You know my name," the lad exclaimed.

"I overheard it when you were with Jillian."

"But you remembered it!"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Zeke stepped back, gazing at Grimm with blatant adoration. "Because you're a powerful warrior, and I'm, well... me. I'm just Zeke. Nobody notices me. 'Cept Jillian."

Grimm eyed the lad, taking in Zeke's half-defiant, half-ashamed stance. He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "While I'm here at Caithness, how would you like to serve as my squire, lad?"

"Squire?" Zeke gaped. "I canna be a squire! I canna see well."

"Why doona you let me be the judge of that? My needs are fairly simple. I need someone to see to my horse. He doesn't like to be penned, so his food and water must be brought to him wherever he happens to be. He needs to be brushed and groomed, and he needs to be ridden."

With his last words, Zeke's hopeful expression vanished.

"Well, he doesn't need to be ridden for some time yet, he had a good hard ride on the way here," Grimm amended hastily. "And I could probably give you a few lessons."

"But I canna see clearly. I canna possibly ride."

"A horse has a great deal of common sense, lad, and can be trained to do many things for his rider. We'll take it slowly. First, will you care for my stallion?"

"Aye," Zeke breathed. "I will! I vow I will!"

"Then let's go meet him. He can be standoffish to strangers unless I bring them around first." Grimm took the lad's hand in his own; he was amazed by how the tiny hand was swallowed in his grip. So fragile, so precious. A brutal flash of memories burst over him—a child, no older than Zeke, pinioned on a McKane sword. He shook it off savagely and closed his fingers securely around Zeke's.

"Wait a minute." Zeke tugged him to a stop. "You still didn't tell me. Why doesn't Jillian like you?"

Grimm rummaged for an answer that might make sense to Zeke. "I guess it's because I teased and tormented her when she was a young lass."

"You picked on her?"

"Mercilessly," Grimm agreed.

"Jillian says the lads only tease the lasses they secretly like. Did you pull her hair too?"

Grimm frowned at him, wondering what that had to do with anything. "I suppose I might have, a time or two," he admitted after some thought.

"Och, good!" Zeke exclaimed, his relief evident. "So you're courting her now. She needs a husband," he said matter-of-factly.

Grimm shook his head, the merest hint of an ironic grin curving his lips. He should have seen that one coming.

CHAPTER 7

GRIMM CLAMPED HIS HANDS OVER HIS EARS, BUT IT didn't help. He tugged a pillow over his head, to no avail. He considered getting up and slamming the shutters, but a quick glance revealed that he was to be deprived of even that small pleasure. They were already closed. One of the many "gifts" that was part and parcel of being a Berserker was absurdly heightened hearing; it had enabled him to survive on occasions when a normal man couldn't have heard the enemy stealthily approaching. Now it was proving a grave disadvantage.

He could hear *her*. Jillian.

All he wanted to do was sleep—for Christ's sake, it wasn't even dawn! Did the lass never rest? The trill of a lone flute drifted up, scaling the stone walls of the castle and creeping through the slats of the shutters on a chill morning breeze. He could feel the melancholy notes prying at the stubborn shutters on his heart. Jillian was everywhere at Caithness: blooming in the flower arrangements on the tables, glowing in the children's smiles, stitched into the brilliantly woven tapestries. She was inescapable. Now she dared invade his sleep with the haunting melody of an ancient Gaelic love song, soaring to a high wail, then plummeting to a low moan with such convincing anguish that he snorted. As if she knew the pain of unrequited love! She was beautiful, perfect, blessed with parents, home, family, a place to belong. She had never wanted for love, and he certainly couldn't imagine any man denying her anything. Where had she learned to play a heartbreaking love song with such plaintive empathy?

He leapt from the bed, stomped to the window, and flung the shutters open so hard they crashed into the walls. "Still play that silly thing, do you?" he called. *God, she was beautiful*. And God forgive him—he still wanted her every bit as badly as he had years ago. Then he'd told himself she was too young. Now that she was a woman fully grown he could no longer avail himself of that excuse.

She was standing below him on a rocky cleft overlooking the loch. The sun was a buttery gold crescent, breaking the horizon of the silvery loch. Her back was to him. She stiffened; the bittersweet song stuttered and died.

"I thought you were in the east wing," Jillian said without turning. Her voice carried as clearly to his ears as had the melody, despite her being twenty feet

below him.

"I choose my own domain, peahen. As I always have." He leaned out the window slightly, absorbing every detail of her: blond hair rippling in the breeze, the proud set of her shoulders, the haughty angle at which she cocked her head, while she looked out over the loch as if she could scarcely bear to acknowledge his existence.

"Go home, Grimm," she said coldly.

"'Tis not for you that I stay, but for your da," he lied.

"You owe him such allegiance, then? You, who gives allegiance to none?" she mocked.

He winced. "Allegiance is not beyond me. 'Tis merely that there are so few deserving it."

"I don't want you here," she flung over her shoulder.

It irritated him that she wouldn't turn about and look at him; it was the least she could do while they said nasty things to each other. "I doona care what you want," he forced himself to say. "Your da summoned me here, and here I will remain until he releases me."

"I have released you!"

Grimm snorted. Would that she could release him, but whatever kept him bound to Jillian was indestructible. He should know; he'd tried for years to destroy the bond, not to care where she was, how she fared, if she was happy. "The wishes of a woman are insignificant when weighed against a man's," he said, certain insulting the feminine gender at large would bring her around to face him so he could savor the passion of her anger, in lieu of the sensual passion he desperately longed to provoke in her. *Berserker*, his mind rebuked. *Leave her alone—you have no right.*

"You are such a bastard!" Jillian unwittingly accommodated his basest wishes, spinning so quickly she took a spill. Her brief stumble presented him with a breathtaking view of the swell of her breasts. Pale, they sloped to a gentle valley that disappeared beneath the bodice of her gown. Her skin was so translucent

that he could see a faint tracing of blue veins. He pressed against the window ledge to hide the sudden rise of his kilt.

"Sometimes I vow you aim to provoke me." She scowled up at him, pushing off the ground with her hand as she stood up straight, stealing his glimpse of cleavage.

"Now, why would I bother to do that, brat?" he asked coolly—so coolly it was counterpoint and insult to her raised voice.

"Could it be that you're afraid if you ever stopped torturing me, you might actually like me?" she snapped.

"Never suffer that delusion, Jillian." He splayed his hand through his hair and winced self-consciously. He could never manage to tell a lie without making that gesture. Fortunately, she didn't know that.

"Seems to me you've developed an overwhelming fondness for your hair, Grimm Roderick. I hadn't noticed your little vanities before. Probably because I couldn't see that much of you beneath all the dirt and filth."

It happened in a flash. With her words he was dirty again—mud-stained, blood-soaked, and filthy beyond redemption. No bath, no scouring could ever cleanse him. Only Jillian's words could make him clean again, and he knew he didn't inspire absolution.

"Some people grow up and mature, brat. I woke up one day, shaved, and discovered I was a bloody handsome man." When her eyes widened, he couldn't resist pushing her a little harder. "Some women have said I'm too handsome to have. Perhaps they feared they couldn't hold me in the face of so much competition."

"Spare me your conceit."

Grimm smiled inwardly. She was so lovely, temper-flushed and disdainful, and so easily provoked. Countless times he'd wondered what kind of passion she'd unleash with a man. With a man like him. His thoughts took a dangerous segue into the forbidden. "I've heard men say you're too beautiful to touch. Is that true? *Are* you untouched?" He bit his tongue the instant the words escaped.

Jillian's mouth dropped in disbelief. "*You* would ask me that?"

Grimm swallowed. There'd been a time when he'd known from firsthand experience precisely how untouched she was, and that was a memory he'd do well to bury. "When a lass permits virtual strangers to kiss her, it makes one wonder what else she permits." Bitterness tightened his lips, clipping his words.

Jillian stepped back as if he'd flung something more substantial than an insult in her direction. She narrowed her eyes and studied him suspiciously. "Curiously, it sounds like you care."

"Not a chance. I simply doona wish to have to force you into marrying Ramsay before your da returns. I suspect Gibraltar might like to be present to give the *maiden* away." Jillian was watching him intently, too intently for his liking. He wondered desperately what was going on inside her head. She'd always been far too clever, and he was perilously close to acting like a jealous suitor. When she'd been young, he'd needed every ounce of his will to carry on a convincing charade of dislike. Now that she was a woman grown, drastic measures were necessary. He shrugged his shoulders arrogantly. "Look, peahen, all I want is for you to take your bloody flute off somewhere else so I can get a bit of sleep. I didn't like you when you were a wee lass, and I doona like you now, but I owe your da and I will honor his missive. The only thing I remember about Caithness is that the food was good and your da was kind." The lie practically burned his tongue.

"You don't remember anything about me?" she asked carefully.

"A few things, nothing of any significance." Restless fingers twined through his hair, tugging it free from his thong.

She glared at him. "Not even the day you left?"

"You mean the McKane attacking?" he asked blandly.

"No." She frowned up at him. "I meant later that day, when I found you in the stables."

"What are you talking about, lass? I doona recall you finding me in the stables before I left." He caught his traitorous hand in mid-rise to his hair and crammed it into the waistband of his kilt.

"You remember nothing of me?" she repeated tightly.

"I remember one thing: I remember you following me around until you nearly drove me mad with your incessant chattering," he said, looking as bored and long-suffering as possible.

Jillian turned her back on him and didn't utter another word.

He watched her for a few moments, his eyes dark with memories, before pulling the shutters closed. When a few moments later the haunting silvery notes of her flute wept, he held his hands over his ears so tightly that it hurt. How could he possibly hope to remain here yet continue to resist her when every ounce of his being demanded he make her his woman?

I doona recall you finding me in the stables before I left.

He'd never uttered a greater lie. He recalled the night in the stables. It was seared into his memory with the excruciating permanence of a brand. It had been the night twenty-two-year-old Grimm Roderick had stolen an unforgettable taste of heaven.

After the McKane were driven off and the battle was over, he'd desperately scrubbed the blood from his body, then packed, flinging clothing and keepsakes without care for what they were or where they landed. He'd nearly brought destruction upon the house that had sheltered him freely, and he would never again subject them to such danger. Jillian's brother Edmund had been wounded in the battle, and although it seemed certain he would recover, young Edmund would bear scars for life. Leaving was the only honorable thing Grimm could do.

He found Jillian's note when his fingers had closed upon the book of Aesop's fables she had given him his first Christmas at Caithness. She'd slipped the note with her big, looping scrawl between the pages so it protruded above the binding. *I will be on the roof at gloaming. I must speak to you tonight, Grimm!*

Crumpling the note furiously, he stomped off for the stables.

He dared not risk seeing her before he left. Filled with self-loathing for bringing the McKane to this sacred place, he would not commit another transgression. Ever since Jillian had started to mature, he'd been unable to get her out of his mind. He knew it was wrong. He was twenty-two years old and she was scarcely

sixteen. While she was certainly old enough to be wed—hell, many lasses were wed by thirteen—he could never offer her marriage. He had no home, no clan, and he was a dangerously unpredictable beast to boot. The facts were simple: No matter how much he might want Jillian St. Clair, he could never have her.

At sixteen he'd lost his heart to the wee golden lass; at twenty-two he was beginning to lose his head over the woman. Grimm had concluded a month ago that he had to leave soon, before he did something stupid like kiss her, like find reasons to justify carrying her off and making her his woman. Jillian deserved the best: a worthy husband, a family of her own, and a place to belong. He could offer her none of that.

Strapping his packs on the horse's back, he sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. As he began leading his horse from the stable, Jillian burst through the doors.

Her eyes darted warily between him and his horse, not missing a detail. "What are you doing, Grimm?"

"What the hell does it look like I'm doing?" he snarled, beyond exasperated that he'd failed to escape without encountering her. How much temptation was he expected to resist?

Tears misted her eyes, and he cursed himself. Jillian had seen so much horror today; he was the lowest of bastards to add to her pain. She'd sought him out in need of comfort, but unfortunately he was in no condition to console her. The aftereffects of Berserker gang left him unable to make clear choices and sensible decisions. Experience had taught him that he was more vulnerable after a Berserker rage; both his mind and body were more sensitive. He needed desperately to get away and find a safe, dark place to sleep for days. He had to force her to leave this instant, before he did something unforgivably stupid. "Go find your da, Jillian. Leave me alone."

"Why are you doing this? Why are you leaving, Grimm?" she asked plaintively.

"Because I must. I never should have come here to begin with!"

"That's silly, Grimm," she cried. "You fought gloriously today! Da locked me in my room, but I could still see what was going on! If you hadn't been here, we

wouldn't have had a chance against the McKane—" Her voice broke, and he could see the horror of the bloody battle fresh in her eyes.

And Christ, she'd just admitted that she'd watched him when he'd been berserk! "If I hadn't been here—" he began bitterly, then caught himself on the verge of admitting *he* was the only reason the McKane had come at all.

"If you hadn't been here, what?" Her eyes were huge.

"Nothing," he muttered, staring at the floor.

Jillian tried again. "I watched you from the win—"

"And you should have been hiding, lass!" Grimm cut her off before she could prattle glowingly about his "bravery" in battle—bravery that sprang from the devil himself. "Have you no idea what you look like? Doona you know what the McKane would have done to you if they'd found you?" His voice cracked on the words. It had been fear of what the McKane might do to his beloved lass that had driven him even deeper into Berserker gang during battle, turning him into a ruthless killing animal.

Jillian nervously tugged her lower lip between her teeth. The simple gesture shot a bolt of pure lust through him, and he despised himself for it. He was strung tighter than a compound bow; residual adrenaline from the battle still flooded his body. The heightened arousal attained in Berserker gang had the unfortunate effect of lingering, riding him like a demon, goading him to mate, to conquer. Grimm shook his head and turned his back on her. He couldn't continue looking at her. He didn't trust himself. "Get away from me. You doona know what you risk, being here with me."

Straw rustled against the hem of her gown as she moved. "I trust you completely, Grimm Roderick."

The sweet innocence in her young voice nearly undid him. He grimaced. "That's your first mistake. Your second mistake is being here with me. *Go away.*"

She stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder. "But I do trust you, Grimm," she said.

"You can't trust me. You doona even know me," he growled, his body rigid with

tension.

"Yes, I do," she argued. "I've known you for years. You've lived here since I was a wee lass. You're my hero, Grimm—"

"Stop it, lass!" he roared as he spun and knocked her hand away from him so roughly that she stepped back a few paces. His glacial blue eyes narrowed. "So you think you know me, do you?" He advanced on her.

"Yes," she insisted stubbornly.

He sneered. "You doona know a bloody thing. You doona know who I've killed and who I've hated and who I've buried and how. You doona know what happens to me because you doona know what I really am!"

"Grimm, I'm frightened," she whispered. Her eyes were wide pools of gold in the lantern light.

"So run to your bloody da! He'll comfort you!"

"He's with Edmund—"

"As you should be!"

"I need you, Grimm! Just put your arms around me! Hold me! Don't leave me!"

Grimm's limbs locked, freezing him clear to his marrow. *Hold me*. Her words hung in the air. Oh, how he longed to. Christ, how often he'd dreamed of it. Her deep amber eyes shifted with fear and vulnerability, and he reached for her despite his resolve. He caught his hands in mid-reach. His shoulders bowed, he was suddenly exhausted by the weight of the internal debate he waged. He could not offer her comfort. He was the very reason she needed comforting. Had he never come to Caithness, he would never have brought destruction on his heels. He could never forgive himself for what he'd brought upon the people who'd opened their hearts to him when no one else had cared if he'd lived or died.

"You doona know what you're saying, Jillian," he said, suddenly immensely weary.

"Don't leave me!" she cried, flinging herself into his arms.

As she burrowed against his chest, his arms closed instinctively around her. He held her tightly, offering her shuddering body the shelter of his damned near invincible one.

He cradled her in his arms while she sobbed, suffering a terrible sense of kinship with her. Too clearly he recalled the loss of his own innocence. Eight years before he'd stood and watched his own clan fight the McKane. The sight of such brutality had rendered him nearly senseless with grief and rage, and now his young Jillian knew the same terrors. How could he have done this to her?

Would she have nightmares? Relive it as he had—at least a thousand times?

"Hush, sweet lass," he murmured, stroking her cheek. "I promise you the McKane will never come back here. I promise you that somehow I will always look after you, no matter where I am. I will never let anyone hurt you."

She sniffled, her face buried in the hollow between his shoulder and his neck. "You can't protect me if you're not here!"

"I spoke with your da and told him I'm leaving. But I also told him that if you ever need me, he has only to summon me." Although Gibraltar had been angry with him for leaving, he'd seemed mollified that he would know where to find Grimm should the need arise.

Jillian turned her tearstained face up to his, her eyes wide.

He lost his breath, gazing at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were brilliant with tears. Her lips were swollen from crying and her hair tumbled in a mane of gold fire about her face.

He had absolutely no intention of kissing her. But one moment they were looking into each other's eyes and the next moment he'd bent his head forward to press a pledge against her lips: a light, sweet promise of protection.

The moment their lips met, his body jerked violently.

He drew back and stared at her blankly.

"D-did you f-feel that?" she stammered, confusion darkening her eyes.

Not possible, he assured himself. *The world does not shake on its axis when you*

kiss a lass. To convince himself—he kissed her again. The earthquake began just beneath his toes.

His innocent pledge took on a life of its own, became a passionate, soul-searing kiss between a man and his mate. Her maiden lips parted sweetly beneath his and she melted into the heat of his body.

Grimm squeezed his eyes tightly shut, recalling that long-ago kiss as he listened to the trill of Jillian's flute outside his window.

God, how vividly he recalled it. And he'd not touched another woman since.

* * * * *

Quinn insisted they go for a ride, and although Jillian initially resisted, before long she was glad she went. She'd forgotten how charming Quinn was, how easily he could make her laugh. Quinn had come to Caithness the summer after Grimm had arrived. Her father had fostered the two lads—a chieftain's eldest son and a homeless scavenger—as equals, although in Jillian's eyes no other boy could ever have been Grimm's equal.

Quinn had been well mannered and thoughtful, but it had been Grimm she'd fallen in love with the day she'd met him—the wild boy living in the woods at the perimeter of Caithness. It had been Grimm who'd upset her so much she'd cried hot tears of frustration. It had been Quinn who'd comforted her when he'd left. Funny, she mused as she glanced over at the dashing man riding beside her, some things hadn't changed a bit.

Quinn caught her sidelong glance and grinned easily. "I've missed you, Jillian. Why is it that we haven't seen one another in years?"

"Judging from the tales I heard of you, Quinn, you were too busy conquering the world and the women to spare time for a simple Lowland lass like me," she teased.

"Conquering the world perhaps. But the women? I think not. A woman is not to be conquered, but to be wooed and won. Cherished."

"Tell that to Grimm." She rolled her eyes. "That man cherishes nothing but his own bad temper. Why does he hate me so?"

Quinn measured her a moment, as if debating what to say. Finally he shrugged. "I used to think it was because he secretly liked you and couldn't let himself show it because he felt he was a nobody, not good enough for the daughter of Gibraltar St. Clair. But that doesn't make sense, because Grimm is now a wealthy man, rich enough for any woman, and God knows the women desire him. Frankly, Jillian, I have no idea why he's still cruel to you. I'd thought things would change, especially now that you're old enough to be courted. I can't say that I'm sorry, though, because it's less competition as far as I'm concerned," he finished with a pointed look.

Jillian's eyes widened. "Quinn—" she started, but he waved his hand to silence any protest.

"No, Jillian. Don't answer me now. Don't even make me say the words. Just get to know me again, and then we'll speak of things that may come to be. But come what may, I will always be good to you, Jillian," he added softly.

Jillian tugged her lower lip between her teeth and spurred her mount into a canter, stealing a glance over her shoulder at the handsome Quinn. *Jillian de Moncreiffe*, she thought curiously.

Jillian Alanna Roderick, her heart cried defiantly.

CHAPTER 8

JILLIAN STOOD IN THE LONG, NARROW WINDOW OF THE drum tower a hundred feet above the courtyard and watched Grimm. She'd climbed the winding stairs to the tower, telling herself she was trying to get away from "that man," but she knew she wasn't being entirely honest with herself.

The drum tower held memories, and that's what she'd gone to revisit. Splendid memories of the first summer Grimm had been in residence, that wondrous season she'd taken to sleeping in her princess tower. Her parents had indulged her; they'd had men seal the cracks in the stones and hung tapestries so she'd be warm. Here were all her favorite books, the few remaining dolls that had escaped Grimm's "burials at sea" in the loch, and other love-worn remnants of what had been the best year of her life.

That first summer she'd found the "beast-boy," they'd spent every moment together. He had taken her on hikes and taught her to catch trout and slippery salamanders. He'd sat her on a pony for the first time; he'd built her a snow cave on the lawn their first winter together. He'd been there to raise her up if she wasn't tall enough to see, and he'd been there to pick her up if she fell. Nightly he'd told her outlandish stories until she'd passed into a child's exhausted slumber, dreaming of the next adventure they'd share.

To this day, Jillian could still recall the magic feeling she'd had whenever they'd been together. It had seemed perfectly possible that he might be a rogue angel sent to guard her. After all, she'd been the one who'd discovered him lurking in the thickets of the forest behind Caithness. She'd been the one who'd coaxed him near with a tempting feast, waiting patiently day after day on a rumpled blanket with her beloved puppy, Savanna TeaGarden.

For months he'd resisted her offering, hiding in his bracken and shadows, watching her as intently as she'd watched him. But one rainy day he'd melted out of the mist and come to kneel upon her blanket. He'd gazed at her with an expression that had made her feel beautiful and protected. Sometimes, in the years to follow, despite his cruel indifference, she'd caught that same look in his eyes when he thought she wasn't watching. It had kept her hope alive when it would have been wiser to let it die. She'd grown to young womanhood

desperately in love with the fierce boy-turned-man who had a strange way of appearing whenever she needed him, rescuing her repeatedly.

Granted, he hadn't always been gentle while he did it. One time he'd trussed her up, high in an oak's lofty branches, before tearing off through the woods to rescue Savanna from a pack of wild dogs he'd saved Jillian from moments earlier. Lashed to the tree, terrified for her puppy, she'd howled and struggled but had been unable to loosen her bonds. He'd left her there for hours. But sure as the sun always rose and set, he had come back for her—cradling the wounded, but remarkably alive, wolfhound in his arms.

He'd refused to discuss with her how he'd saved her puppy from the rabid pack, but she hadn't worried overmuch. Although Jillian had found it mildly astonishing that he'd been unhurt himself, over the years she'd come to expect that Grimm would suffer no harm. Grimm was her hero. He could do anything.

One year after she'd met Grimm, Quinn de Moncreiffe had arrived to be fostered at Caithness. He and Grimm became close as brothers, sharing a world of adventures from which she was painfully excluded. That had been the beginning of the end of her dreams.

Jillian sighed as Grimm disappeared into the castle. Her back stiffened when he reappeared a few moments later with Zeke. She narrowed her eyes when Zeke slipped his hand trustingly into Grimm's. She could still recall how easy it had been to slide her child's hand into his strong grip. He was the kind of man that children and women wanted to keep around, although for wholly different reasons.

There was certainly a mystery about him. It was as if a swirling black mist had parted the day Grimm Roderick had stepped into existence, and no amount of questioning, no relentless scrutiny could ever illuminate his dark past. He was a deep man, unusually aware of the tiniest nuances in a conversation or interaction. When she'd been a child, he'd always seemed to know exactly how she was feeling, anticipating her feelings before she had understood them herself.

If she was honest with herself, the only truly cruel thing she could accuse him of was years of indifference. He'd never done anything terribly unkind in and of itself. But the night he'd left, his absolute rejection had caused her to harden her

heart against him.

She watched him swing Zeke up in his arms. What on earth was he doing? Putting him on a horse? Zeke couldn't ride, he couldn't see well enough. She opened her mouth to call down, then paused. Whatever else he might be, Grimm was not a man who made mistakes. Jillian resigned herself to watch for a few moments. Zeke was giddy with excitement, and it wasn't often she saw him happy. Several of the children and their parents had gathered around to watch. Jillian held her breath. If Grimm's intentions went awry it would be a painful, public humiliation for Zeke, and one he'd not live down for a long time.

She watched as Grimm bowed his dark head close to the horse; it looked as if he was whispering words in the prancing gray stallion's ear. Jillian suffered a momentary fancy that the horse had actually nodded his head in response. When Grimm slipped Zeke on the horse's back, she held her breath. Zeke sat rigidly at first, then slowly relaxed as Grimm led the stallion in easy wide circles around the courtyard. Well, that was all fine and good, Jillian thought, but now what would Zeke do? He certainly couldn't be led around all the time. What was the point of putting the child on a horse when he could never ride on his own?

She quickly decided she'd had enough. Obviously Grimm didn't understand; he should not be teaching the boy to want impossible things. He should be encouraging Zeke to read books, to indulge in safer pursuits, as Jillian had done. When a child was handicapped, it made no sense to encourage him to test those limits foolishly in a manner that might cause him harm. Far better to teach him to appreciate different things and pursue attainable dreams. No matter that, like any other child, Zeke might wish to run and play and ride—he had to be taught that he couldn't, that it was dangerous for him to do so with his impaired vision.

She would take Grimm to task over his lapse in judgment immediately, before any more damage was done. Quite a crowd had gathered in the courtyard, and she could already see the parents shaking their heads and whispering among themselves. She promised herself she would handle this problem coolly and rationally, giving the onlookers no cause for gossip. She would explain to Grimm the proper way to treat young Zeke and demonstrate that she wasn't always a witless idiot.

She exited the drum tower quickly and made her way to the courtyard.

* * * * *

Grimm led the horse in one last slow circle, certain that at any moment Jillian would burst from the castle. He knew he shouldn't spend time with her, yet he found himself deliberately arranging to give Zeke his first riding lesson where she'd be certain to see. Only moments before he had glimpsed a flutter of motion and a fall of golden hair in the tower window. His gut tightened with anticipation as he lifted Zeke down from the stallion. "I suspect you feel comfortable with his gait now, Zeke. We've made a good start."

"He's very easy to ride. But I won't be able to guide him myself, so what's the point? I could never ride by myself."

"Never say never, Zeke," Grimm chided gently. "The moment you say 'never' you've chosen not to try. Rather than worrying about what you can't do, set your mind to thinking of ways that you could do it. You might surprise yourself."

Zeke blinked up at him. "But everybody tells me I canna ride."

"Why do *you* think you can't ride?" Grimm asked, lowering the boy to the ground.

"'Cause I canna see clearly. I may run your horse smack into a rock!" Zeke exclaimed.

"My horse has eyes, lad. Do you think he'd allow you to run him into a rock? Occam wouldn't let you run him into anything. Trust me, and I'll show you that a horse can be trained to compensate for your vision."

"You really think one day I might be able to ride without your help?" Zeke asked in a low voice, so the onlookers gathered around wouldn't hear the hope in his voice and mock him for it.

"Yes, I do. And I'll prove it to you, in time."

"What madness are you telling Zeke?" Jillian demanded, joining them.

Grimm turned to face her, savoring her flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes. "Go on, Zeke." He gave the lad a gentle nudge toward the castle. "We'll work on this again tomorrow."

Zeke grinned at Grimm, stole a quick look at Jillian's face, and left hurriedly.

"I'm teaching Zeke to ride."

"Why? He can't see well, Grimm. He will never be able to ride by himself. He'll only end up getting hurt."

"That's not true. The lad's been told he can't do a lot of things that he can do. There are different methods for training a horse. Although Zeke may have poor eyesight, Occam here"—Grimm gestured to his snorting stallion—"has keen enough senses for them both."

"What did you just say?" Jillian's brow furrowed.

"I said my horse can see well enough—"

"I heard that part. What did you call your horse?" she demanded, unaware her voice had risen sharply, and the dispersing crowd had halted collectively, hanging on her every word.

Grimm swallowed. He hadn't thought she'd remember! "Occam," he said tightly.

"Occam? You named your horse *Occam*!" Every man, woman, and child in the lower bailey gaped at the uneven timbre of their lady's voice.

Jillian stalked forward and poked an accusing finger at his chest. "Occam?" she repeated, waiting.

She was waiting for him to say something intelligent, Grimm realized. Damn the woman, but she should know better than that. Intelligent just didn't happen when he was around Jillian. Then again, demure and temperate didn't seem to happen when Jillian was around him. Give them a few minutes and they'd be brawling in the courtyard of Caithness while the whole blasted castle watched in abject fascination.

Grimm searched her face intently, seeking some flaw of form that betrayed a weakness of character, anything he could seize upon and stoke into a defense against her charms, but he may as well have searched the seas for a legendary selkie. She was simply perfect. Her strong jaw reflected her proud spirit. Her clear golden eyes shone with truth. She pursed her lips, waiting. Overly full lips, the lower one plump and rosy. Lips that would part sweetly when he took her, lips between which he would slide his tongue, lips that might curve around his...

And those lips were moving, but he didn't have the damndest idea what she was saying because he'd taken a dangerous segue into a sensual fantasy involving heated, flushed flesh, Jillian's lips, and a man's need. The roar of blood pounding in his ears must have deafened him. He struggled to focus on her words, which faded back in just in time for him to hear her say

"You lied! You said you never thought about me at all."

He gathered his scattered wits defensively. She was looking much too pleased with herself for his peace of mind. "What are you pecking away at now, little peahen?" he said in his most bored voice.

"Occam," she repeated triumphantly.

"That's my horse," he drawled, "and just what *is* your point?"

Jillian hesitated. Only an instant, but he saw the flicker of embarrassment in her eyes as she must have wondered if he really didn't remember the day she'd discovered the principle of "Occam's Razor," then proceeded to enlighten everyone at Caithness. How could he not recall the child's delight? How could he forget the discomfiture of visiting lords well versed in politics and hunting, yet utterly put off by a woman with a mind, even a lass at the tender age of eleven? Oh, he remembered; he'd been so bloody proud of her it had hurt. He'd wanted to smack the smirks off the prissy lords' faces for telling Jillian's parents to burn her books, lest they ruin a perfectly good female and make her unmarriageable. He remembered. And had named his horse *in* tribute.

Occam's Razor: The simplest theory that fits the facts corresponds most closely to reality. *Fit this, Jillian—why do I treat you so horribly?* He grimaced. The simplest theory that encompassed the full range of asinine behavior he exhibited around Jillian was that he was hopelessly in love with her, and if he wasn't careful she would figure it out. He had to be cold, perhaps cruel, for Jillian was an intelligent woman and unless he maintained a convincing facade she would see right through him. He drew a deep breath and steeled his will.

"You were saying?" He arched a sardonic brow. Powerful men had withered into babbling idiots beneath the sarcasm and mockery of that deadly gaze.

But not his Jillian, and it delighted him as much as it worried him. She held her

ground, even leaned closer, ignoring the curious stares and perked ears of the onlookers. Close enough that her breath fanned his neck and made him want to seal his lips over hers and draw her breath into his lungs so deeply that she'd need him to breathe it back into her. She looked deep into his eyes, then a smile of delight curved her mouth. "You *do* remember," she whispered fiercely. "I wonder what else you lie to me about," she murmured, and he had the dreadful suspicion she was about to start applying a scientific analysis to his idiotic behavior. Then she'd know, and he'd be exposed for the love-struck dolt he was.

He wrapped his hand around her wrist and clamped his fingers tight, until he knew she understood he could snap it with a flick of his hand. He deliberately let his eyes flash the blazing, unholy look people loathed. Even Jillian back-stepped slightly, and he knew that somehow she'd caught the tiniest glimpse of the Berserker in his eyes. It would serve her well to fear him. She *must* be afraid of him—Christ knew, he was afraid of himself. Although Jillian had changed and matured, he still had nothing to offer her. No clan, no family, and no home. "When I left Caithness I swore never to return. *That's* what I remember, Jillian." He dropped her wrist. "And I did not come back willingly, but for a vow made long ago. If I named my horse a word you happen to be familiar with, how arrogant you are to think it had anything to do with you."

"Oh! I am not arrogant—"

"Do you know why your da really brought us here, lass?" Grimm interrupted coldly.

Jillian's mouth snapped shut. It figured that he would be the only one who might tell her the truth.

"Do you? I know you used to have a bad habit of spying, and I doubt much about you has changed."

Her jaw jutted, her spine stiffened, and she threw her shoulders back, presenting him with a clear view of her lush figure—one of the things that had definitely changed about her. She bit her lip to prevent a smug smile when his gaze dropped sharply, then jerked back up.

Grimm regarded her stonily. "Your da summoned the three of us here to secure you a husband, brat. Apparently you're so impossible to persuade that he had to

gather Scotia's mightiest warriors to topple your defenses." He studied her stalwart stance and aloof expression a moment and snorted. "I was right—you do still eavesdrop. You aren't at all surprised by my revelation. Seeing as how you know the plan, why doona you just be a good lass for a change; go find Quinn and persuade him to marry you so I can leave and get on with my life?" His gut clenched as he forced himself to say the words.

"That's what you wish me to do?" she asked in a small voice.

He studied her a long moment. "Aye," he said finally. "That's what I wish you to do." He pushed his hands through his hair before grabbing Occam by the reins and leading him away.

Jillian watched him retreat, her throat working painfully. She would not cry. She would never again waste her tears on him. With a sigh, she turned for the castle, only to come smack up against Quinn's broad chest. He was regarding her with such compassion that it unraveled her composure. Tears filled her eyes as he put his arms around her. "How long have you been standing here?" she asked shakily.

"Long enough," he replied softly. "It wouldn't take any persuading, Jillian," Quinn assured her. "I cared deeply for you as a lass—you were as a cherished younger sister to me. I could love you as much more than a sister now."

"What is there to love about me? I'm a blithering idiot!"

Quinn smiled bitterly. "Only for Grimm. But then, you always were a fool for him. As to what one might love about you: your irrepressible spirit, your wit, your curiosity about everything, the music you play, your love for the children. You have a pure heart, Jillian, and that's rare."

"Oh, Quinn, why are you always so good to me?" She affectionately brushed his cheek with her knuckles before she slipped past him and dashed, alone, for the castle.

CHAPTER 9

"WHAT THE HELL IS YOUR PROBLEM?" Quinn demanded, bursting into the stables.

Grimm glanced over his shoulder as he slid the halter from Occam. "What are you talking about? I doona have a problem," he replied, waving an eager-to-assist stable boy away. "I'll take care of my own horse, lad. And doona be penning him up in here. I just brought him in to rub him down. *Never* pen him."

Nodding, the stable boy backed away and left quickly.

"Look, McIlloch, I don't care what motivates you to be such a bastard to her," Quinn said, dropping all pretense by using Grimm's real name. "I don't even wish to know. Just stop. I won't have you making her cry. You did it enough when we were young. I didn't interfere then, telling myself that Gavrael McIlloch had had a tough life and maybe he needed some slack, but you don't have a tough life anymore."

"How would you know?"

Quinn glared. "Because I know what you've become. You're one of the most respected men in Scotland. You're no longer Gavrael McIlloch—you're the renowned Grimm Roderick, a legend of discipline and control. You saved the King's life on a dozen different occasions. You've been rewarded so richly that you're worth more than old St. Clair and myself put together. Women fling themselves at your feet. What more could you want?"

Only one thing—the thing I can never have, he brooded. *Jillian*. "You're right, Quinn. As usual. I'm an ass and you're right. So marry her." Grimm turned his back and fiddled with Occam's saddle. He shrugged Quinn's hand off his shoulder a moment later. "Leave me alone, Quinn. You'd make a perfect husband for Jillian, and since I saw Ramsay kissing her the other day, you'd better move fast."

"Ramsay kissed her?" Quinn exclaimed. "Did she kiss him back?"

"Aye," Grimm said bitterly. "And that man has spoiled more than his share of

innocent lasses, so do us both a favor and save Jillian from him by offering for her yourself."

"I already have," Quinn said quietly.

Grimm spun sharply. "You did? When? What did she say?"

Quinn shifted from foot to foot. "Well, I didn't exactly out-and-out ask her, but I made my intentions clear."

Grimm waited, one dark brow arched inquiringly.

Quinn tossed himself down on a pile of hay and leaned back, resting his weight on his elbows. He blew a strand of blond hair out of his face irritably. "She thinks she's in love with you, Grimm. She has always thought she was in love with you, ever since she was a child. Why don't you finally come clean with the truth? Tell her who you really are. Let her decide if you're good enough for her. You're heir to a chieftain—if you'd ever go home and claim it. Gibraltar knows exactly who you are, and he summoned you to be one of the contenders for her hand. Obviously he thinks you're good enough for his daughter. Maybe you're the only one who doesn't."

"Maybe he brought me just to make you look good by comparison. You know, invite the beast-boy. Isn't that what Jillian used to call me?" He rolled his eyes. "Then the handsome laird looks even more appealing. She can't be interested in me. As far as Jillian knows, I'm not even titled. I'm a nobody. And I thought you wanted her, Quinn." Grimm turned back to his horse and swept Occam's side with long, even strokes of the brush.

"I do. I'd be proud to make Jillian my wife. Any man would—"

"Do you love her?"

Quinn cocked a brow and eyed him curiously. "Of course I love her."

"No, do you *really* love her? Does she make you crazy inside?" Grimm watched him carefully.

Quinn blinked. "I don't know what you mean, Grimm."

Grimm snorted. "I didn't expect you would," he muttered.

"Oh, hell, this is a snarl of a mess." Quinn exhaled impatiently and dropped onto his back in the fragrant hay. He plucked a stem of clover from the pile and chewed on it thoughtfully. "I want her. She wants you. And you're my closest friend. The only unknown factor in this equation is what you want."

"First of all, I sincerely doubt she wants me, Quinn. If anything, it's the remains of a childish infatuation that, I assure you, I will relieve her of. Secondly, it doesn't matter what I want." Grimm produced an apple from his sporran and offered it to Occam.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter? Of course it matters." Quinn frowned.

"What *I* want is the most irrelevant part of this affair, Quinn. I'm a Berserker," Grimm said flatly.

"So? Look what it has brought you. Most men would trade their souls to be a Berserker."

"That would be a damned foolish bargain. And there's a lot you doona know that is part and parcel of the curse."

"It's proved quite a boon for you. You're virtually invincible. Why, I remember down at Killarnie—"

"I doona wish to talk about Killarnie—"

"You killed half the damned—"

"Haud yer wheesht!" Grimm's head whipped around. "I doona wish to talk about killing. It seems that's the only thing I'm good for. For all that I'm this ridiculous legend of control, there's still a part of me I can't control, de Moncreiffe. I have no control over the rage. I never have," he admitted roughly. "When it happens, I lose memory. I lose time. I have no idea what I'm doing when I'm doing it, and when it's over, I have to be told what I've done. You know that. You've had to tell me a time or two."

"What are you saying, Grimm?"

"That you must wed her, no matter what I might feel, because I can never be anything to Jillian St. Clair. I knew it then, and I know it now. I will never marry."

Nothing has changed, *I* haven't been able to change."

"You *do* feel for her." Quinn sat up on the hay mound, searching Grimm's face intently. "Deeply. And that's why you try to make her hate you."

Grimm turned back to his horse. "I never told you how my mother died, did I, de Moncreiffe?"

Quinn rose and dusted hay from his kilt. "I thought she was killed in the massacre at Tuluth."

Grimm leaned his head against Occam's velvety cheek and breathed deeply of the soothing scent of horse and leather. "No. Jolyn McIlloch died much earlier that morning, before the McKane even arrived." He delivered the words in a cool monotone. "My da murdered her in a fit of rage. Not only did I sink to such foolishness as summoning a Berserker that day, I suffer an inherited madness."

"I don't believe that, Grimm," Quinn said flatly. "You're one of the most logical, rational men I know."

Grimm made a gesture of impatience. "Da told me so himself the night I left Tuluth. Even if I gave myself latitude, even if I managed to convince myself I didn't suffer an inherited weakness of mind, I'm still a Berserker. Doona you realize, Quinn, that according to ancient law we 'pagan worshipers of Odin' are to be banished? Ostracized, outcast, and murdered, if at all possible. Half the country knows Berserkers exist and seek to employ us; the other half refuses to admit we do while they attempt to destroy us. Gibraltar must have been out of his mind when he summoned me—he couldn't possibly seriously consider me for his daughter's hand! Even if I wanted with all my heart to take Jillian to wife, what could I offer her? A life such as this? That's assuming I'm not addled by birthright, to boot."

"You're not addled. I don't know how you got the ridiculous idea that because your da killed your mother there's something wrong with *you*. And no one knows who you really are except for me, Gibraltar, and Elizabeth," Quinn protested.

"And Hatchard," Grimm reminded. And Hawk and Adrienne, he recalled.

"So four of us know. None of us would ever betray you. As far as the world is concerned you're Grimm Roderick, the King's legendary bodyguard. All that

aside, I don't see how it would be a problem for you to admit who you really are. A lot of things have changed since the massacre at Tuluth. And although some people do still fear Berserkers, the majority revere them. You're some of the mightiest warriors Alba has ever produced, and you know how we Scots worship our legends. The Circle Elders say only the purest, most honorable blood in Scotland can actually call the Berserker."

"The McKane still hunt us," Grimm said through his teeth.

"The McKane have always hunted any man they suspected was Berserk. They're jealous. They spend every waking moment training to be warriors and can never match up to a Berserker. So defeat them, and lay it to rest. You're not fourteen anymore. I've seen you in action. Rouse up an army. Hell, I'd fight for you! I know scores of men who would. Go home and claim your birthright—"

"My gift of inherited madness?"

"The chieftainship, you idiot!"

"There might be a small problem with that," Grimm said bitterly. "My crazy, murdering da has the dreadful manners to still be lingering on this earth."

"What?" Quinn was speechless. He shook his head several times and grimaced. "Christ! How can I walk around all these years thinking I know you, only to find out I don't know a blethering thing about you? You told me your da was dead."

It seemed all his close friends were saying the same thing lately, and he wasn't a man given to lying. "I thought he was, for a long time." Grimm ran an impatient hand through his hair. "I will never go home, Quinn, and there are some things about being Berserk that you doona understand. I can't have any degree of intimacy with a woman without her realizing that I'm not normal. So what am I supposed to do? Tell the lucky woman I am one of those savage killing beasts that have gotten such a bad reputation over the centuries? Tell her I can't see blood without losing control of myself? Tell her that if my eyes ever start to seem like they're getting incandescent, to run as far away from me as she can get because Berserkers have been known to turn on friend and foe indiscriminately?"

"You've never once turned on me!" Quinn snapped. "And I've been beside you

when it happened many times!"

Grimm shook his head. "Marry her, Quinn. For Christ's sake! Marry her and free me!" He cursed harshly, dropping his head against his stallion.

"Do you really think it will?" Quinn asked angrily. "Will it free any of us, Grimm?"

* * * * *

Jillian strolled the wall-walk, the dim passage behind the parapet, breathing deeply of the twilight. Gloaming was her favorite hour, the time when dusk blurred into absolute darkness broken only by a silvery moon and cool white stars above Caithness. She paused, resting her arms against the parapet. The scent of roses and honeysuckle carried on the breeze. She inhaled deeply. Another scent teased her senses, and she cocked her head. Dark and spicy; leather and soap and man.

Grimm.

She turned slowly and he was there, standing behind her on the roof, deep in the shadows of the abutting walls watching her, his gaze unfathomable. She hadn't heard a sound as he'd approached, not a whisper of cloth, not one scuffle of his boots on the stones. It was as if he were fashioned of night air and had sailed the wind to her solitary perch.

"Will you marry?" he asked without preface.

Jillian sucked in a breath. Shadows couched his features but for a bar of moonlight illuminating his intense eyes. How long had he been there? Was there a "me," unspoken, at the end of his sentence? "What are you asking?" she said breathlessly.

His smooth voice was bland. "Quinn would make a fine husband for you."

"Quinn?" she echoed.

"Aye. He's golden as you, lass. He's kind, gentle, and wealthy. His family would cherish you."

"And what about yours?" She couldn't believe she dared ask.

"What about mine, what?"

Would your family cherish me? "What is your family like?"

His gaze was icy. "I have no family."

"None?" Jillian frowned. Surely he had some relatives, somewhere.

"You know nothing about me, lass," he reminded her in a low voice.

"Well, since you keep butting your nose into my life, I think I have the right to ask a few questions." Jillian peered intently at him, but it was too dark to see him clearly. How could he seem such a part of the night?

"I'll quit butting my nose. And the only time I butt my nose in is when it looks like you're about to get in trouble."

"I do *not* get into trouble all the time, Grimm."

"So"—he gestured impatiently—"when will you marry him?"

"Who?" She seethed, plucking at the folds of her gown. Clouds passed over the moon, momentarily obscuring him from her view.

His eerily disembodied voice was mildly reproaching. "Try to follow the conversation, lass. Quinn."

"By Odin's shaft—"

"Spear," he corrected with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"I am not marrying Quinn!" she informed the dark corner furiously.

"Certainly not Ramsey?" His voice deepened dangerously. "Or was he such a good kisser that he's already persuaded you?"

Jillian drew a deep breath. She released it and closed her eyes, praying for temperance.

"Lass, you have to wed one of them. Your da demands it," he said quietly.

She opened her eyes. Praise the saints, the clouds had blown by and she could

once again discern the outline of his form. There was a flesh-and-blood man in those shadows, not some mythical beast. "You're one of the men my da brought here for me, so I guess that means I could choose you, doesn't it?"

He shook his head, a blur of movement in the gloom. "Never do that, Jillian. I have nothing to offer you but a lifetime of hell."

"Maybe you think that, but maybe you're wrong. Maybe, if you quit feeling sorry for yourself, you'd see things differently."

"I doona feel sorry for myself—

"Ha! You're drowning in it, Roderick. Only occasionally does a smile manage to steal over your handsome face, and as soon as you catch it you swallow it. You know what your problem is?"

"No. But I have the feeling you're going to tell me, peahen."

"Clever, Roderick. That's supposed to make me feel stupid enough to shut up. Well, it won't work, because I feel stupid around you all the time anyway, so I may as well act stupid too. I suspect your problem is that you're afraid."

Grimm leaned indolently back against the stones of the wall, looking every inch a man who'd never contemplated the word *fear* long enough for it to gain entrance into his vocabulary.

"Do you know what you're afraid of?" she pushed bravely on.

"Considering that I didn't know I was afraid, I'm afraid you've got me at a bit of a disadvantage," he mocked.

"You're afraid you might have a feeling," she announced triumphantly.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of feelings, lass," he said, dark, sensual knowledge dripping from his voice. "It just depends on the kind of feeling—"

Jillian shivered. "Don't try to change the subject—"

"And if the feeling's below my waist—"

"By segueing into a discussion about your debauched—"

"Then I'm perfectly comfortable with it."

"And perverse male needs—"

"Perverse male needs?" he echoed, suppressed laughter lacing his words.

Jillian bit her lip. She always ended up saying too much around him, because he had the bad habit of talking over her, and she lost her head time and again.

"The issue at hand is feelings—as in emotions," she reminded stiffly.

"And you think they're mutually exclusive?" Grimm prodded.

Had she said that? she wondered. By the saints, the man turned her brain into mush. "*What* are you talking about?"

"Feelings and *feelings*, Jillian. Do you think they're mutually exclusive?"

Jillian pondered his question a few moments. "I haven't had a lot of experience in that area, but I would guess they are more often for a man than a woman," she replied at length.

"Not all men, Jillian." He paused, then added smoothly, "Exactly how much experience have you had?"

"What was my point?" she asked irritably, refusing to acknowledge his question.

He laughed. By the saints, he laughed! It was a genuine uninhibited laugh—deeply resonant, rich, and warm. She shuddered, because the flash of white teeth in his shadowed face made him so handsome she wanted to cry at the unfairness of his miserly dispensation of such beauty.

"I was hoping you'd tell me that anytime now, Jillian."

"Roderick, conversations with you never go where I think they're going."

"At least you're never bored. That must count for something."

Jillian blew out a frustrated breath. That was true. She was elated, exhilarated, sensually awakened—but never, never bored.

"So are they mutually exclusive for you?" she dared.

"What?" he asked blandly.

"Feelings *and feelings*."

Grimm tugged restlessly at his dark hair. "I suppose I haven't met the woman who could make me feel while I was feeling her."

I could, I know I could! she almost shouted. "But you have those other kind of feelings quite frequently, don't you?" she snipped.

"As often as I can."

"There you go with your hair, again. What is it with you and your hair?" When he didn't reply she said childishly, "I hate you, Roderick." She could have kicked herself the moment she said it. She prided herself on being an intelligent woman, yet around Grimm she regressed into a petty child. She was going to have to dredge up something more effective than the same puerile response if she intended to spar with him.

"No you doona, lass." He uttered a harsh curse and stepped forward, doffing the shadows impatiently. "That's the third time you've said that to me, and I'm getting bloody sick of hearing it."

Jillian held her breath as he moved closer, staring down at her with a strained expression. "You wish you could hate me, Jillian St. Clair, and Christ knows you *should* hate me, but you just can't quite bring yourself to hate me all that much, can you? I know, because I've looked in your eyes, Jillian, and where a great big nothing should be if you hated me, there's a fiery thing with curious eyes."

He turned in a swirl of shadows and descended from the roof, moving with lupine grace. At the bottom of the steps, he paused in a puddle of moonlight and tilted his head back. The pale moon cast his bitter expression into stark relief. "Doona ever say those words to me again, Jillian. I mean it—fair warning. Not ever."

Cobblestones crunched beneath his boots as he disappeared into the gardens, comforting her that he was, indeed, of this world.

She pondered his words for a long time after he'd gone, and she was left alone with the bruised sky on the parapet. Three times he'd called her by name—not

brat or lass, but Jillian. And although his final words had been delivered in a cool monotone, she had seen—unless the moon was playing tricks with her vision—a hint of anguish in his eyes.

The longer she considered it, the more convinced she became. Logic insisted that love and hate could masquerade behind the same facade. It became an issue of simply peeling back that mask to peer beneath it and determine which emotion truly drove the man in the shadow. A glimmer of understanding pierced the gloom that surrounded her.

Go with your heart, her mother had counseled her hundreds of times. *The heart speaks clearly even when the mind insists otherwise.*

"Mama, I miss you," Jillian whispered as the last stain of purple twilight melted into a raven horizon. But despite the distance, Elizabeth St. Clair's strength was inside her, in her blood. She was a Sacheron *and* a St. Clair—a formidable combination.

Indifferent to her, was he? It was time to see about that.

CHAPTER 10

"WELL, THAT'S IT, THEN—THEY'RE OFF," HATCHARD MUTTERED, watching the men depart. He finger-combed his short red beard thoughtfully. He stood with Kaley on the front steps of Caithness, watching three horses fade into swirls of dust down the winding road.

"Why did they have to choose Durrkesh?" Kaley asked irritably. "If they wanted to go catting about, they could very well have gone to the village right here." She waved at the small town clustered protectively near the walls of Caithness that spilled into the valley beyond.

Hatchard shot her a caustic glance. "Although this may come as a grave shock to your... shall we say... accommodating nature, not everyone thinks about catting all the time, Missus Twillow."

"Don't be 'Missus Twillowing' me, Remmy," she snapped. "I'll not be believing you've lived nearly forty years without doing a bit of catting yourself. But I must say, I find it appalling that they're off catting when they were brought here for Jillian."

"If you'd listen for a change, Kaley, you might hear what I've been telling you. They went to Durrkesh because Ramsay suggested they go—not for catting, but to acquire wares that can only be purchased in the city. You told me we've run short of peppercorns and cinnamon, and you won't be finding those wares here." He gestured to the village and allowed a significant pause to pass before adding, "I also heard one might find saffron at the city fair this year."

"*Saffron!* Bless the saints, we haven't had saffron since last spring."

"You've kept me perennially aware of the fact," Hatchard said wryly.

"One does what one can to aid an old man's memory." Kaley sniffed. "And correct me if I'm wrong, but don't you usually send your men for the wares?"

"Seeing how Quinn was so avid to buy an elegant gift for Jillian, I certainly wasn't about to stop him. Grimm, I believe, went with them simply to avoid getting stuck alone with the lass," Hatchard added dryly.

Kaley's eyes sparkled, and she clapped her hands together. "A gift for Jillian. So it's to be Jillian de Moncreiffe, is it? A fine name for a fine lass, I must say. And that would keep her nearby in the Lowlands."

Hatchard returned his pensive gaze to the ribbon of road wending through the valley. He watched the last rider disappear around a bend and clucked his tongue. "I wouldn't be so certain, Kaley," he murmured.

"Whatever is that cryptic remark supposed to mean?" Kaley frowned.

"Just that in my estimation the lass has never had eyes for anyone but Grimm."

"Grimm Roderick is the worst possible man for her!" Kaley exclaimed.

Hatchard turned a curious gaze on the voluptuous maid. "Now, why would you say that?"

Kaley's hand flew to her throat, and she fanned herself. "There are men women desire and there are men women marry. Roderick is *not* the kind of man a woman marries."

"Why not?" Hatchard asked, bewildered.

"He's dangerous," Kaley breathed. "Positively dangerous to the lass."

"You think he might harm her in some way?" Hatchard tensed, prepared to do battle if such was the case.

"Without even meaning to, Remmy." Kaley sighed.

* * * * *

"They've gone where? And for how long did you say?" Jillian's brow puckered with indignation.

"To the city of Durrkesh, milady," Hatchard replied. "I should suppose they'll be gone just shy of a sennight."

Jillian smoothed the folds of her gown irritably. "I wore a dress this morning, Kaley—a pretty one," she complained. "I was even going to ride to the village wearing it instead of Da's plaid, and you know how I hate riding in a dress."

"You look lovely, indeed," Kaley assured her.

"I look lovely for whom? All my suitors have abandoned me."

Hatchard cleared his throat gruffly. "There wouldn't have been one in particular you were hoping to impress, would there?"

Jillian turned on him accusingly. "Did my da put you up to spying on me, Hatchard? You're probably sending him weekly reports! Well, boodle, I'll tell you nothing."

Hatchard had the grace to look abashed. "I'm not sending him reports. I was merely concerned for your welfare."

"You can concern yourself with someone else's. I'm old enough and I worry enough for both of us."

"Jillian," Kaley chided, "crabby does not become you. Hatchard is merely expressing his concern."

"I feel like being crabby. Can't I just do that for a change?" Jillian's brow furrowed as she reflected a moment. "Wait a minute," she said pensively. "Durrkesh, is it? They hold a splendid fair this time of year... the last time I went with Mama and Da, we stayed at a perfectly lovely little inn—the Black Boot, wasn't it, Kaley?"

Kaley nodded. "When your brother Edmund was alive the two of you went to the city often."

A shadow flitted across Jillian's face.

Kaley winced. "I'm sorry, Jillian. I didn't mean to bring that up."

"I know." Jillian drew a deep breath. "Kaley, start packing. I've a sudden urge to go a'fairing, and what better time than now? Hatchard, have the horses readied. I'm tired of sitting around letting life happen to me. It's time I make my life happen."

"This doesn't bode well, Missus Twillow," Hatchard told Kaley as Jillian strolled briskly off.

"A woman has as much right to cat about as a man. At least she's catting after a husband. Now we just have to put our heads together and make certain she chooses the right one," Kaley informed him loftily before sauntering after Jillian, twitching her plump hips in a manner that put Hatchard in mind of a long-forgotten, exceedingly bawdy ditty.

He blew out a gusty breath and headed off to the stables.

* * * * *

The Black Boot sagged alarmingly at the eaves, but fortunately the rooms Grimm had procured were on the third floor, not the top, which meant they should be reasonably safe from the deluge that had begun halfway through their trip.

Pausing outside the open door to the inn, Grimm fisted double handfuls of his shirt and squeezed it. Water gushed from between his hands and splattered loudly on the great stone slab outside the door.

A thick, swirling mist was settling over the town. Within a quarter hour the dense fog would be impossible to navigate through; they'd arrived just in time to avoid the worst of it. Grimm had settled his horse in the small U-shaped courtyard behind the inn, where a ratty lean-to swayed precariously from the drooping roof. Occam would find sufficient shelter, provided the flood didn't carry him off.

Grimm whisked the beaded water droplets off his plaid before entering the inn. Any weaver worth her salt wove the fabric so tightly it was virtually water-repellant, and the weavers at Dalkeith were some of the finest. He unfastened a length of the woolen fabric and draped it across his shoulder. Quinn and Ramsay were already at the fire, toasting their hands and drying their boots.

"Bloody nasty weather out there, ain't it, lads?" The barkeep beckoned cheerfully through the doorway to the adjoining tavern. "Me, I've got a fire in here s'warm as tha' one, and a fine brew to chase yer chill, so dinna tarry. Me name's Mac," he added with a friendly nod. "Come bide a wee."

Grimm glanced at Quinn, who shrugged. His expression plainly said there wasn't much else to do on such a miserably wet evening than pass it drinking. The three men ducked through the low doorway that partitioned the eatery from the tavern

proper and claimed several battered wooden stools at a table by the hearth.

"Seein' as'tis nearly deserted in here, I may as well pull up a seat once I've seen t' yer drinks. No' many venture out in a downpour such as this." The barkeep ambled unevenly to the bar, then lumbered back to their table, producing a bottle of whisky and four mugs with a flourish.

"'Tis a fardlin' mess out there, ain't it? An' where be ye travelin'?" he asked, sitting heavily. "Dinna mind me leg, I think the wood's goin' soft," he added as he grabbed a second stool, lifted his wooden leg by the ankle, and dropped it on the slats. "Sometimes it pains me when the weather goes damp. An' in this damn country, tha's all the tune, ain't it? Gloomy place, she is, but I love 'er. Y'ever been outside of Alba, lads?"

Grimm glanced at Quinn, who was gazing raptly at the barkeep, his expression a mixture of amusement and irritation. Grimm knew they were both wondering if the lonely little barkeep would ever shut up.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

A few hours later the rain hadn't abated, and Grimm used the excuse of checking on Occam to escape the smoky tavern and Mac's incessant prattle. Besieged by the same restlessness that had ridden him at Dalkeith, he could scarcely sit still for longer than a few hours. He slipped into the back courtyard of the inn, wondering what Jillian was doing at the moment. A slight smile curved his lips as he pictured her stomping about, tossing her glorious mane of hair, outraged that she'd been left behind. Jillian despised being excluded from anything "the lads" did. But this was for the best, and she would realize it when Quinn returned with his gift and made his formal pledge. Grimm could scarcely look at Quinn without being struck by what a perfect couple they would make, giving birth to perfect, golden children with aristocratic features and not a touch of inherited madness. Perhaps by getting the two of them together he could redeem himself in some small measure, he mused, although the thought of Jillian with Quinn caused his stomach to tighten painfully.

"Get out o' me kitchen and dinna be returnin', ye ratty-ass whelp." A door on the far side of the courtyard suddenly burst open. A child tumbled head over heels into the night and landed prone in the mud.

Grimm studied the man whose wide frame nearly filled the doorway. He was a big, beefy man, well over six feet tall, with a frizzled crown of short-cropped brown curls. His face was mottled red in patches, either due to rage or exertion, or more likely both, Grimm decided. He clutched a wide butcher's knife that gleamed dully in the light.

The lad clambered to his knees, slipping on the sodden ground. He scrubbed at a spattering of mud on his cheek with thin, dirty fingers. "But Bannion always gives us the scraps. Please, sir, we need to eat!"

"I'm no' Bannion, ye insolent whelp! Bannion doesna work here anymore, and no wonder, if he be giving away to such as ye. I'm the meat butcher now." The man cuffed the child with such vigor that the boy collapsed onto his backside in the mud, shaking his head dazedly. "Ye think we spare any cuts fer the likes o' ye? Ye can rot in a gutter, Robbie MacAuley says. I dinna expect anyone to feed me.

It's the likes o' ye rats that grow up to be thieves and murderers of honest, hardworkin' men." The meat butcher stepped out into the rain, dragged the child from the mud by his scruffy collar, and shook him. When the lad began howling, the butcher cracked a meaty hand across his face.

"Release him," Grimm said quietly.

"Eh?" The man glanced around, startled. A sneer crossed his red face as his gaze lit on Grimm, who was partially concealed by the shadows. The meat butcher straightened menacingly, suspending the boy by one hand. "What's yer concern wi' me business? Stay out o' it. I dinna ask yer opinion and I dinna want it. I found the l'il whelp stealing me vittles—"

"Nay! I dinna steal! Bannion *gives* us the scraps."

The meat butcher backhanded the lad across the face, and blood sprayed from the child's nose.

In the shadow of the lean-to Grimm stared transfixed at the bleeding child. Memories began to crowd him—the flash of a silver blade, a tumble of blond curls and a bloodstained smock, pillars of smoke—an unnatural wind began to rise, and he felt his body twisting inside, reshaping itself until he was hopelessly

lost to the rage within. Far beyond conscious thought, Grimm lunged for the meat butcher, crushing him against the stone wall.

"You son of a bitch." Grimm closed his hands around the man's windpipe. "The child needs food. When I release you, you're going to go in the kitchen and pack him a basket of the finest meat you've got, and then you're going to—"

"Like 'ell I am!" the butcher managed to wheeze. He twisted in Grimm's grip and plunged blindly forward with the knife. As the blade slid home, Grimm's hand relaxed infinitesimally, and the butcher sucked in a whistling breath of air. "There, ye bastard," he cried hoarsely. "Nobody messes wi' Robbie MacAuley. 'At'll be teachin' ye." He shoved Grimm with both hands, twisting the knife as he pushed.

As Grimm swayed back, the butcher started forward, only to fall instinctively backward again, his eyes widening incredulously, for the madman he'd stabbed with a brutality and efficiency that should have caused a mortal wound was smiling.

"Smile. That's it—go on, smile as ye be dyin'," he cried. "'Cause dyin' ye are, and that's fer sure."

Grimm's smile contained such sinister promise that the meat butcher flattened himself up against the wall of the inn like lichen seeking a deep, shady crevice between the stones. "There's a knife in yer belly, man," the meat butcher hissed, eyeing the protruding hilt of the knife to reassure himself it was, indeed, lodged in his assailant's gut.

Breathing evenly, Grimm grasped the hilt with one hand and removed the blade, calmly placing it beneath the butcher's quivering jowls.

"You're going to get the lad the food he came for. Then you will apologize," Grimm said mildly, his eyes glittering. "To 'ell with ye," the butcher sputtered. "Any minute now ye'll be falling on yer face."

Grimm leveled the blade below the butcher's ear, flush across his jugular. "Doona count on it."

"Ye should be dead, man. There's a hole in yer belly!"

"Grimm." Quinn's voice cut through the night air. Pressing gently, with the care of a lover, Grimm pierced the skin on the butcher's neck. "Grimm," Quinn repeated softly. "Gawd, man! Get him offa me!" the butcher cried frantically. "He's deranged! His bleedin' eyes are like—"

"Shut up, you imbecile," Quinn said in a modulated, conciliatory tone. He knew from experience that harshly uttered words could escalate the state of Berserker gang. Quinn circled the pair cautiously. Grimm had frozen with the blade locked to the man's throat. The ragged lad huddled at their feet, gazing up with wide eyes.

"He be Berserk," the lad whispered reverently. "By Odin, look at his eyes."

"He be crazed," the butcher whimpered, looking at Quinn. "Do something!"

"I *am* doing something," Quinn said quietly. "Make no loud noises, and for Christ's sake, don't move." Quinn stepped closer to Grimm, making certain his friend could see him.

"The whelp's just a homeless ne'er-do-well. 'Tis not the thing to be killing an honest man for," the butcher whined. "How was I supposed to know he was a fardlin' Berserker?"

"It shouldn't have made any difference whether he was or not. A man shouldn't behave honorably only when there's someone bigger and tougher around to force him," Quinn said, disgusted. "Grimm, do you want to kill this man or feed the boy?" Quinn spoke gently, close to his friend's ear. Grimm's eyes were incandescent in the dun light, and Quinn knew he was deep into the bloodlust that accompanied Berserker gang. "You only want to feed the boy, don't you? All you want to do is to feed the boy and keep him from harm, remember? Grimm—*Gavrael*—listen to me. Look at me!"

* * * * *

"I hate this, Quinn," Grimm said later as he unbuttoned his shirt with stiff fingers.

Quinn gave him a curious look. "Do you really? What is there to hate about it? The only difference between what you did and what I would have done is that you don't know what you're doing when you're doing it. You're honorable even

when you're not fully conscious. You're so damned honorable, you *can't* behave any other way."

"I would have killed him."

"I'm not convinced of that. I've seen you do this before and I've seen you pull out of it. The older you get, the more control you seem to gain. And I don't know if you've realized this, but you weren't completely unaware this time. You heard me when I spoke to you. It used to take a lot longer to reach you."

Grimm's brow furrowed. "That's true," he admitted. "It seems I manage to retain a sliver of awareness. Not much—but it's more than I used to have."

"Let me see that wound." Quinn drew a candle near. "And bear in mind, the meat butcher would have given no thought to beating the lad senseless and leaving him to die in the mud. The homeless children in this city are considered no better than street rats, and the general consensus is the faster they die, the better."

"It's not right, Quinn," Grimm said. "Children are innocent. They haven't had a chance to be corrupted. We'd do better to take the children off somewhere else to raise them properly. With someone like Jillian to teach them fables," he added.

Quinn smiled faintly as he bent over the puckered wound. "She will be a wonderful mother, won't she? Like Elizabeth." Bemused, he drew his fingers over the already-closing cut in Grimm's side. "By Odin's spear, man, how quickly do you heal?"

Grimm grimaced slightly. "Very. It seems to be getting even quicker, the older I get."

Quinn dropped to the bed, shaking his head. "What a blessing it must be. You never have to worry about infection, do you? How *does* one kill a Berserker, anyway?"

"With great difficulty," Grimm replied dryly. "I've tried to drink myself to death, and that didn't work. Then I tried to labor myself to death. Failing that, I just plunged into every battle I could find, and that didn't work either. The only thing left was to try was to fu—" He broke off, embarrassed. "Well, as you can see, that didn't work either."

Quinn grinned. "No harm in trying, though, was there?"

Grimm begrudged a faint curve of his lip.

"Get some sleep, man." Quinn lightly punched him on the shoulder. "Everything looks better in the morning. Well, almost everything," he added with a sheepish grin, "so long as I wasn't too drunk the night before. Then sometimes the wench looks worse. And so do I, for that matter."

Grimm just shook his head and flopped back on the bed. After folding his arms behind his head, he was asleep in seconds.



CHAPTER 11

EVERYTHING LOOKS BETTER IN THE MORNING. WATCHING Jillian from his window, Grimm recalled Quinn's words and agreed wholeheartedly. What lapse of judgment had persuaded him that she wouldn't follow them?

She was breathtaking, he acknowledged as he watched her hungrily, safe in the privacy of his room. Clad in a velvet cloak of amber, she was a vision of flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Her blond hair tumbled over her shoulders, casting the sun back at the sky. The rain had stopped—probably just for her, he brooded—and she stood in a puddle of sunshine that shafted over the roof from the east, proclaiming the hour to be shortly before noon. He'd slept like the dead, but he always did after succumbing to the Berserker rage, no matter how brief its duration.

Peering out the narrow casement window, he rubbed the glass until it permitted him an unmarred view. While Hatchard gathered her bags, Jillian linked her arm through

Kaley's and chatted animatedly. When Quinn appeared in the street below a few moments later, gallantly offered his arms to both ladies, and escorted them into the inn, Grimm exhaled dismally.

Ever-gallant, ever-golden Quinn.

Grimm muttered a soft curse and went to feed Occam before worrying about his own breakfast.

* * * * *

Jillian mounted the main staircase to her room, glanced about to ascertain she was alone, then detoured stealthily down the rear steps, smoothing the folds of her cloak. Biting her lip, she exited into the small courtyard behind the inn. He was there, just as she'd suspected, feeding Occam a handful of grain and murmuring quietly. Jillian paused, enjoying the sight of him. He was tall and magnificent, and his dark hair rippled in the breeze. His plaid was slung too low for propriety, riding his lean hips with sensual insolence. She could see a peek of his back where his shirt had obviously been hastily tucked. Her fingers itched to stroke the smooth olive-tinted skin. When he bent to pick up a brush, the

muscles in his legs rippled, and despite her vow to make no sound, she exhaled a breath of unadulterated longing.

Of course, he heard her. She instantly assumed a mask of indifference and volleyed into questions to head off a potential verbal sully. "Why don't you ever pen Occam?" she asked brightly.

Grimm allowed a brief glance over his shoulder, then started brushing the horse's sleek flank. "He was caught in a stable fire once."

"He doesn't appear to have suffered for it." Jillian traversed the courtyard, eyeing the stallion. "Was he injured?" The horse was magnificent, hands taller than most and a glossy, unmarked slate gray.

Grimm stopped brushing. "You never stop with your questions, do you? And what are you doing here, anyway? Couldn't you just be a good lass and wait at Caithness? No, I forgot, Jillian hates being left behind," he said mockingly.

"So who rescued him?" Jillian was determined not to rise to the bait.

Grimm returned his attention to the horse. "I did." There was a pause, filled only with the rasp of bristles against horseflesh. When he spoke again, he released a low rush of words: "Have you ever heard a horse scream, Jillian? It's one of the most bloodcurdling sounds I've ever heard. It cuts through you as cruelly as the sound of an innocent child's cry of pain. I think it has always been the innocence that bothers me most."

Jillian wondered when he'd heard those screams and wanted desperately to ask, but was hesitant to pry at his wounds. She held her tongue, hoping he might continue if she stayed silent.

He didn't. Silently stepping back from the stallion, he made a sharp gesture, accompanied by a clicking noise with his tongue against his teeth. Jillian watched in amazement as the stallion sank to its knees, then dropped heavily to its side with a soft nicker. Grimm knelt by the horse and motioned her closer.

She slipped to her knees beside Grimm. "Oh, poor, sweet Occam," she whispered. The entire underside of the horse was badly scarred. Lightly she ran her fingers over the thick skin, and her brows puckered sympathetically.

"He was burned so badly, they said he wouldn't live," Grimm told her. "They planned to put him down, so I

bought him. Not only was he wounded, he was crazed for months afterward. Can you imagine the terror of being trapped in a burning barn, penned in? Occam could run faster than the fleetest horse, could have left the blaze miles behind, but he was imprisoned in a man-made hell. I've never penned him since."

Jillian swallowed and glanced at Grimm. His expression was bitter. "You sound as if you've been trapped in a few man-made hells yourself, Grimm Roderick," she observed softly.

His gaze mocked her. "What would you know about man-made hells?"

"A woman lives most of her life in a man-made world," Jillian replied. "First her father's world, then her husband's, finally her son's, by whose grace she continues on in one of their households should her husband die before her. And in Scotland, the husbands always seem to die before the women in one war or another. Sometimes merely watching the hells men design for each other—that's horror enough for any woman. We feel things differently than you men do." She impulsively laid her hand against his lips to silence him when he started to speak. "No. Don't say anything. I know you think I know little of sorrow or pain, but I've had my share. There are things you don't know about me, Grimm Roderick. And don't forget the battle I watched when I was young." Her eyes widened with disbelief when Grimm lightly kissed the tips of her fingers where they lay across his lips.

"Touche, Jillian," he whispered. He caught her hand in his and placed it gently in her lap. Jillian sat motionless when he curled his own about it protectively.

"If I were a man who believed in wishes on stars, I would wish on all of them that Jillian St. Clair might never suffer the smallest glimpse of any hell. There should only be heaven for Jillian's eyes."

Jillian remained perfectly still, masking her astonishment, exulting in the sensation of his strong, warm hand cupping hers. By the saints, she would have ridden all the way to England through the savagery of a border battle if she'd known *this* was waiting for her at the end of her journey. She fancied her body had taken root where she knelt; to continue being touched by him she would

willingly grow old in the small courtyard, suffering wind and rain, hail and snow without the slightest care. Mesmerized by the glimpse of hesitation in his gaze, her head tilted up; his seemed to move forward and down as if nudged by a serendipitous breeze.

His lips were a breath from hers, and she waited, her heart thundering.

"Jillian! Jillian, are you out there?"

Jillian closed her eyes, willing the owner of the intruding voice to hell and farther. She felt the soft brush of Grimm's lips across hers as he quickly, lightly delivered a kiss that was nothing like the one she'd been anticipating. She wanted his lips to bruise hers, she wanted his tongue in her mouth and his breath in her lungs, she wanted everything he had to give.

"It's Ramsay," Grimm said through his teeth. "He's coming out. Get up off your knees, lass. *Now*."

Jillian stumbled hastily to her feet and stepped back, trying desperately to see Grimm's face, but his dark head had fallen forward to the spot hers had occupied a moment before. "Grimm," she whispered urgently. She wanted him to raise his head; she needed to see his eyes. She had to confirm that she'd truly seen desire in his eyes as he'd gazed at her.

"Lass." He groaned the word, his head still bowed.

"Yes?" she whispered breathlessly.

His hands fisted in the folds of his kilt, and she waited, trembling.

The door clattered open and shut behind them. "Jillian," Ramsay called as he entered the courtyard. "There you are. I'm so pleased you joined us. I thought you might like to accompany me to the fair. What's your horse doing on the ground, Roderick?"

Jillian released her breath in a hiss of frustration and kept her back to Ramsay. "What, Grimm? What?" she entreated in an urgent whisper.

He raised his head. There was a defiant glint in his blue eyes. "Quinn is in love with you, lass. I think you should know that," he said softly.

CHAPTER 12

JILLIAN DEFTLY ELUDED RAMSAY BY TELLING HIM SHE needed to buy "woman things"—a statement that appeared to set his imagination to flight. Thus she was able to spend the afternoon shopping with Kaley and Hatchard. At the silversmith she bought a new buckle for her da. From the tanner she purchased three snowy lambskin rugs—thick as sin and soft as rabbit fur. At the goldsmith's she bartered shrewdly for tiny, hammered-gold stars to adorn a new gown.

But all the while her mind was back in the courtyard, lingering on the dark, sensual man who'd betrayed the first glimpse of a crack in the massive walls around his heart. It had stunned her, bewildered her, and fortified her resolve. Jillian didn't doubt for a moment what she'd seen. Grimm Roderick cared. Buried beneath a mound of rubble—the debris from a past she was beginning to suspect had been more brutal than she could comprehend—there was a very real, vulnerable man.

She'd seen in his stark gaze that he desired her, but more significantly, that he had feelings so deep he couldn't express them, and subsequently did everything in his power to deny them. That was sufficient hope for her to work with. It didn't occur to Jillian, even for a moment, to wonder if he was worth the effort—she knew he was. He had everything to offer that she'd ever wanted in a man. Jillian understood that people didn't come perfect; sometimes they'd been so badly scarred that it took love to heal them and allow them to realize their potential. Sometimes the badly scarred ones had the greatest depth and the most to offer because they understood the infinite value of tenderness. She would be the sun beating down upon the cloak of indifference he'd donned so many years ago, inviting him to walk without defenses.

Her anticipation was so strong, it made her feel shaky and weak. Desire had shimmered in Grimm's gaze when he looked at her, and whether he realized it or not, she'd seen an intense, sensual promise on his face.

Now all she had to do was figure out how to release it. She shivered, rattled by the intuitive knowledge that when Grimm Roderick unleashed his passion, it would definitely be worth waiting for.

"Are you chilled, lass?" Hatchard asked worriedly.

"Chilled?" Jillian echoed blankly.

"You shivered."

"Oh please, Hatchard!" Kaley snorted. "That was a daydreaming shiver. Can't you tell the difference?"

Jillian glanced at Kaley, startled. Kaley merely smiled smugly. "Well, it was, wasn't it, Jillian?"

"How did *you* know?"

"Quinn looked very handsome this morning," Kaley said pointedly.

"So did Grimm," Hatchard snapped immediately. "Didn't you think so, lass? I know you saw him by the stables."

Jillian gaped at Hatchard with a horrified expression. "Were you spying on me?"

"Of course not," Hatchard said defensively. "I just happened to glance out my window."

"Oh," Jillian said in a small voice, her glance darting between her maid and man-at-arms. "Why are you two looking at me like that?" she demanded.

"Like what?" Kaley fluttered her lashes innocently.

Jillian rolled her eyes, disgusted by their obvious matchmaking efforts. "Shall we return to the inn? I promised I'd return in time to have dinner."

"With Quinn?" Kaley said hopefully.

Hatchard nudged the maid. "With Grimm."

"With Occam," Jillian flung over her shoulder dryly.

Hatchard and Kaley exchanged amused glances as Jillian dashed down the street, her arms overflowing with packages.

"I thought she brought *us* to carry," Hatchard observed with a lift of one fox-red

eyebrow and a gesture of his empty hands.

Kaley smiled. "Remmy, I suspect she could cart the world off on her shoulders and not feel an ounce. The lass is in love, for certain. My only question is—with which man?"

* * * * *

"Which one, Jillian?" Kaley asked without preface as she fastened the tiny buttons at the back of Jillian's gown, a creation of lime silk that tumbled in a sensuous ripple from clever ribbons placed at the bodice.

"Which one, what?" Jillian asked nonchalantly. She ran her fingers through her hair, pulling a sleek fall of gold over her shoulder. She perched on the tiny settle before a blurry mirror in her room at the inn, itching with impatience to join the men in the dining room.

Kaley's reflection met Jillian's with a wordless rebuke. She tugged Jillian's hair back and swept it up into a knot with more enthusiasm than was necessary.

"Ouch." Jillian scowled. "All right, I know what you meant. I just don't wish to answer it yet. Let me see how things go this evening."

Kaley relaxed her grip and smiled. "So you admit to this much—you do intend to select a husband from one of them? You'll heed your father's wishes?"

"Yes, Kaley, oh absolutely yes!" Jillian's eyes sparkled as she leapt to her feet.

"I suppose you could wear your hair down this evening," Kaley begrudged. "Although you should at least allow me to dress and curl it."

"I like it straight," Jillian replied. "It's wavy enough of its own accord, and I don't have time to fuss."

"Oh, now the lass who took over an hour to choose a dress doesn't have time to fuss?" Kaley teased.

"I'm already late, Kaley," Jillian said with a blush as she swept from the room.

* * * * *

"She's late," Grimm said, pacing irritably. They'd been waiting for some time in the small anteroom that lay between the section of the inn that held private

rooms and the public eatery. "By Odin's spear, why doona we just send a tray up to her room?"

"And forgo the pleasure of her company? Not a chance," Ramsay said.

"Stop pacing, Grimm," Quinn said with a grin. "You really need to relax a bit."

"I am perfectly relaxed," Grimm said, stalking back and forth.

"No, you're not," Quinn argued. "You look almost brittle. If I tapped you with my sword, you'd shatter."

"If you tapped me with your sword, I'd bloody well tap you back with mine, and not with the hilt."

"There's no need to get defensive—"

"I am not being defensive!"

Quinn and Ramsay both leveled patronizing gazes at him.

"That's not fair." Grimm scowled. "That's a trap. If someone says 'doona get defensive,' what possible response can a person make except a defensive one? You're stuck with two choices: Say nothing, or sound defensive."

"Grimm, sometimes you think too much," Ramsay observed.

"I'm going to have a drink." Grimm seethed. "Come get me when she's ready, *if* that remarkable event manages to occur before the sun rises."

Ramsay shot Quinn an inquiring look. "He wasn't quite so foul-tempered at court, de Moncreiffe. What's his problem? It's not me, is it? I know we had a few misunderstandings in the past, but I thought they were over and forgotten."

"If memory serves me, the scar on your face is a memento from one of those 'misunderstandings,' isn't it?" When Ramsay grimaced, Quinn continued. "It's not you, Logan. It's how he's always acted around Jillian. But it seems to have gotten worse since she's grown up."

"If he thinks he's going to win her, he's wrong," Ramsay said quietly.

"He's not trying to win her, Logan. He's trying to hate her. And if you think

you're going to win her, *you're* wrong."

Ramsay Logan made no reply, but his challenging gaze spoke volumes as he turned away and entered the crowded dining room.

Quinn cast a quick look at the empty stairs, shrugged, and followed on his heels.

* * * * *

When Jillian arrived downstairs, there was no one waiting for her.

Fine bunch of suitors, she thought. *First they leave me, then they leave me again.*

She glanced back up the stairs, plucking nervously at the neckline of her gown. Should she return for Kaley? The Black Boot was the finest inn in Durrkesh, boasting the best food to be had in the village, yet the thought of walking into the crowded eating establishment by herself was a bit daunting. She'd never gone into a tavern eatery alone before.

She moved to the door and peeked through the opening.

The room was packed with boisterous clusters of patrons. Laughter swelled and broke in waves, despite the fact that half the patrons were forced to stand while eating. Suddenly, as if ordained by the gods, the people faded back to reveal a dark, sinfully handsome man standing by himself near the carved oak counter that served as a bar. Only Grimm Roderick stood with such insolent grace.

As she watched, Quinn walked up to him, handed him a drink, and said something that nearly made Grimm smile. She smiled herself as he caught the expression midway through and quickly terminated any trace of amusement. When Quinn melted back into the crowd, Jillian slipped into the main room and hastened to Grimm's side. He glanced at her and his eyes flared strangely; he nodded but said nothing. Jillian stood in silence, searching for something to say, something witty and intriguing; she was finally alone with him in an adult setting, able to engage in intimate conversation as she'd fantasized so many times.

But before she could think of anything to say, he seemed to lose interest and turned away.

Jillian kicked herself mentally. *Hell's bells, Jillian*, she chided herself, *can't you*

dredge up a few words around this man? Her eyes started an adoring journey at the nape of his neck, caressed his thick black hair, wandered over the muscled back straining against the fabric of his shirt as he raised an arm for another draught of ale. She reveled in the mere sight of him, the way the muscles in his shoulders bunched as he gripped an acquaintance by the hand. Her eyes traveled lower, taking in the way his waist narrowed to tight, muscular hips and powerful legs.

His legs were dusted with hair, she noted, drawing a shaky breath, studying the backs of his legs below his kilt, but where did that silky black hair begin and end?

Jillian released a breath she hadn't even known she was holding. Every ounce of her body responded to his with delicious anticipation. Merely standing next to this darkly seductive man, her legs felt weak and her tummy was filled with a shivery sensation.

When Grimm leaned back, momentarily brushing against her in the crowded room, she briefly laid her cheek against his shoulder so softly that he didn't know she'd thieved the touch. She inhaled the scent of him and reached brazenly forward. Her hands found the blades of his shoulders and she scratched gently with her nails, lightly scoring his skin through his shirt.

A soft groan escaped his lips, and Jillian's eyes widened. She scratched gently, stunned that he said nothing. He didn't pull away from her. He didn't spin on his heel and lash out at her.

Jillian held her breath, then inhaled greedily, reveling in the crisp aroma of spicy soap and man. He began to move slightly beneath her nails, like a cat having its chin scratched. Could it be he was actually enjoying her touch?

Oh, can the gods just grant me one wish tonight—to feel the kiss of this man!

She slid her palms lovingly over his back and pressed closer to his body. Her fingers traced the individual muscles in his broad shoulders, slid down his tapered waist, then swept back up again. His body relaxed beneath her hands.

Heaven, this is heaven, she thought dreamily.

"You're looking mighty contented, Grimm." Quinn's voice interrupted her

fantasy. "Amazing what a drink can do for your disposition. Where's Jillian gotten off to? Wasn't she just here with you a moment ago?"

Jillian's hands stilled on Grimm's back, which was so broad that it completely shielded her from Quinn's view. She ducked her head, feeling suddenly guilty. The muscles in Grimm's back went rigid beneath her motionless fingers. "Didn't she step outside for a breath of fresh air?" she was stunned to hear Grimm ask.

"By herself? Hell's bells, man—you shouldn't let her go wandering outside by herself!" Quinn's boots clipped smartly on the stone floor as she strode off in search of her.

Grimm whipped around furiously. "What do you think you're doing, peahen?" He snarled.

"I was touching you," she said simply.

Grimm grabbed both her hands in his, nearly crushing the delicate bones in her fingers. "Well, doona be, lass. There is nothing between you and me—"

"You leaned back," she protested. "You didn't seem to be so unhappy—"

"I thought you were a tavern wench!" Grimm said, running a furious hand through his hair.

"Oh!" Jillian was crestfallen.

Grimm lowered his head till his lips brushed her ear, taking pains to make his next words audible over the din in the noisy eatery. "In case you doona recall, it is Quinn who wants you and Quinn who is clearly the best choice. Go find him and touch him, lass. Leave me to the tavern wenches who understand a man like me."

Jillian's eyes sparkled dangerously as she turned away and pushed through the crowded room.

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He would survive the night. It couldn't be too bad; after all, he'd lived through worse. Grimm had been aware of Jillian since the moment she'd entered the room. He had, in fact, deliberately turned away from her when it appeared she'd

been about to speak. Little good that had done—as soon as she'd touched him he'd been unable to force himself to step away from the sensual feel of her hands on his back. He'd let it go too far, but it wasn't too late to salvage the situation.

Now he studiously kept his back to Jillian, methodically pouring whisky into a mug. He drank with a vengeance, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, longing for the ability to dull his perfect Berserker senses. Periodically he heard the breathless lilt of her laughter. Occasionally, as the proprietor moved bottles upon shelves, he caught a glimpse of her golden hair in a polished flagon.

But he didn't give a damn, any fool could see that much. He'd pushed her to do what she was currently doing, so how could he care? He didn't, he assured himself, because he was one sane man among a race seemingly condemned to be dragged about by violent, unpredictable emotions that were nothing more than unrelieved lust. Lust, not love, and neither one had a damned thing to do with Jillian.

Christ! Who did he think he was kidding? Grimm closed his eyes and shook his head at his own lies.

Life was hell and he was Sisyphus, eternally condemned to push a boulder of relentless desire up a hill, only to have it flatten him before he reached the crest. Grimm had never been able to tolerate futility. He was a man who resolved things, and tonight he would see to it that Jillian solidified her betrothal to Quinn and that would be the end of his involvement.

He couldn't covet his best friend's wife, could he? So all he had to do was get her wed to Quinn, and that would be the end of his agony. He simply couldn't live with this battle waging within him much longer. If she was free and unwed, he could still dream. If she were safely married, he would be forced to put his fool dreams to rest. So resolved, Grimm stole a covert glance over his shoulder to see how things were progressing. Only peglegged Mac behind the counter heard the hollow whistle of his indrawn breath and noticed the rigid set of his jaw.

Jillian was standing halfway across the room, her golden head tilted back, doing that bedazzling woman-thing to his best friend, which essentially involved nothing more than being what she was: irresistible. A teasing glance, vivacious eyes flashing; a delectable lower lip caught between her teeth. The two were obviously in their own little world, oblivious to him. The very situation he'd

encouraged her to seek. It infuriated him.

As he watched, the world that wasn't Jillian—for what was the world without Jillian?—receded. He could hear the rustle of her hair across the crowded tavern, the sigh of air as her hand rose to Quinn's face. Then suddenly the only sound he could hear was the blood thundering in his ears as he watched her slender fingers trace the curve of Quinn's cheek, lingering upon his jaw. His gut tightened and his heart beat a rough staccato of anger.

Mesmerized, Grimm's hand crept to his own face. Jillian's palm feathered Quinn's skin; her fingers traced the shadow beard on Quinn's jaw. Grimm fervently wished he'd broken that perfect jaw a time or two when they'd played as lads.

Deeply oblivious to Mac's fascinated gaze, Grimm's hand traced the same pattern on his own face; he mimicked her touch, his eyes devouring her with such intensity that she might have fled, had she turned to look at him. But she didn't turn. She was too busy gazing adoringly at his best friend.

Behind him a soft snort and a whistle pierced the smoky air. "Man, ye've got it bloody bad, and that's more truth than ye'll find in another bottle o' rotgut mash." Mac's voice shattered the fantasy that Grimm was certainly *not* having. "It's a spot of 'ell wanting yer best friend's wife, now, isn't it?" Mac nodded enthusiastically, warming to the subject. "Me, meself, I had a bit o' thing for one o' me own friend's girl, oh let's see, musta been ten years—"

"She's *not* his wife." The eyes Grimm turned on Mac were not the eyes of a sane man. They were the eyes his villagers had seen before judiciously turning their backs on him so many years ago—the ice-blue eyes of a Viking Berserker who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

"Well, she sure as 'ell is his *something*" Mac shrugged off the unmistakable warning in Grimm's eyes with the aplomb of a man who'd survived too many tavern brawls to get overly concerned about one irritable patron. "And yer wishing she wasn't, that's fer sure." Mac removed the empty bottle and picked up a full one that was on the counter. He looked at it curiously. "Now where did this come from?" he asked with a frown. "Och, me mind's getting addled, I dinna even recall openin' this one, though fer sure ye'll be drinking it," Mac said, pouring him a fresh mug. The loquacious barkeep ambled into the room behind

the bar and returned a moment later with a heaped basket of brandy-basted chicken. "The way yer drinkin', ye need to be eatin', man," he advised.

Grimm rolled his eyes. Unfortunately, all the whisky in Scotland couldn't dull a Berserker's senses. While Mac tended to a new arrival, Grimm dumped the fresh mug of whisky over the chicken in frustration. He had just decided to go for a long walk when Ramsay sat down next to him.

"Looks like Quinn's making some headway," Ramsay muttered darkly as he eyed the chicken. "Mmm, that looks juicy. Mind if I help myself?"

"Have at it," Grimm said stiffly. "Here—have a drink too." Grimm slid the bottle down the bar.

"No thanks, man. Got my own." Ramsay raised his mug.

Husky, melodic laughter broke over them as Jillian and Quinn joined them at the bar. Despite his best efforts, Grimm's eyes were dark and furious when he glanced at Quinn.

"What do we have here?" Quinn asked, helping himself to the basket of chicken.

"Excuse me," Grimm muttered, pushing past them, ignoring Jillian completely.

Without a backward glance, he left the tavern and melted into the Durrkesh night.

* * * * *

It was nearly dawn when Grimm returned to the Black Boot. Climbing the stairs wearily, he topped the last step and froze as an unexpected sound reached his ears. He peered down the hallway, eyeing the doors one by one.

He heard the sound again—a whimper, followed by a deeper, husky groan.

Jillian? With Quinn?

He moved swiftly and silently down the corridor, pausing outside Quinn's room. He listened intently and heard it a third time—a husky sigh and a gasp of indrawn air—and each sound ripped through his gut like a double-edged blade. Rage washed over him and everything black he'd ever tried to suppress quickened within. He felt himself slipping over treacherous terrain into the fury

he'd first felt fifteen years ago, standing above Tuluth. Something more powerful than any single man could be had taken shape within his veins, endowing him with unspeakable strength and unthinkable capacity for bloodshed—an ancient Viking monster with cold eyes.

Grimm laid his forehead against the cool wood of Quinn's door and breathed in carefully measured gasps as he struggled to subdue his violent reaction. His breathing regulated slowly—sounding nothing like the uncontrolled noises coming from the other side of the door. Christ—he'd encouraged her to marry Quinn, not to go to bed with him!

A feral growl escaped his lips.

Despite his best intentions, his hand found the knob and he turned it, only to meet the defiance of a lock. For a moment he was immobilized, stunned by the barrier. A barrier between him and Jillian—a lock that told him she had chosen. Maybe he had pushed her, but she might have taken a bit more time choosing! A year or two—perhaps the rest of her life.

Aye, she had clearly made her choice—so what right did he have to even consider shattering the door into tiny slivers of wood and selecting the deadliest shard to drive through his best friend's heart? What right had he to do anything but turn away and make his path back down the dark corridor to his own personal hell where the devil surely awaited him with an entirely new boulder to wrestle to the top of the hill: the obdurate stone of regret.

The internal debate raged a tense moment, ending only when the beast within him reared its head, extended its claws, and shattered Quinn's door.

* * * * *

Grimm's breath rasped in labored pants. He crouched in the doorway and peered into the dimly lit room, wondering why no one had leapt, startled, from the bed.

"Grimm..." The word pierced the gloom weakly.

Bewildered, Grimm slipped into the room and moved quickly to the low bed. Quinn was tangled in sodden sheets, curled into a ball—alone. Vomit stained the scuffed planks of the floor. A water tin had been crushed and abandoned, a ceramic pitcher was broken beside it, and the window stood open to the chill

night air.

Suddenly Quinn thrashed violently and heaved up from the bed, doubling over. Grimm rushed to catch him before he plunged to the floor. Holding his friend in his arms, he gaped uncomprehendingly until he saw a thin foam of spittle on Quinn's lips.

"P-p-poi-son." Quinn gasped. "H-help... me."

"No!" Grimm breathed. "Son of a bitch!" he cursed, cradling Quinn's head as he bellowed for help.

CHAPTER 13

"WHO WOULD POISON QUINN?" HATCHARD PUZZLED. "No one dislikes Quinn. Quinn is the quintessential laird and gentleman."

Grimm grimaced.

"Will he be all right?" Kaley asked, wringing her hands.

"What's going on?" A sleepy-eyed Jillian stood in the doorway. "Goodness," she exclaimed, eyeing the jagged splinters of the door. "What happened in here?"

"How do you feel, lass? Are you well? Does your stomach hurt? Do you have a fever?" Kaley's hands were suddenly everywhere, poking at her brow, prodding her belly, smoothing her hair.

Jillian blinked. "Kaley, I'm fine. Would you stop poking at me? I heard the commotion and it frightened me, that's all." When Quinn moaned, Jillian gasped. "What's wrong with Quinn?" Belatedly she noted the disarray of the room and the stench of illness that clung to the linens and drapes.

"Fetch a physician, Hatchard," Grimm said.

"The barber is closer," Hatchard suggested.

"No barber," Grimm snapped. He turned to Jillian. "Are you all right, lass?" When she nodded, he expelled a relieved breath. "Find Ramsay," he instructed Kaley ominously.

Kaley's eyes widened in comprehension, and she flew from the room.

"What happened?" Jillian asked blankly.

Grimm laid a damp cloth on Quinn's head. "I suspect it's poison." He didn't tell her he was certain; the recent contents of Quinn's stomach pervaded the air, and to a Berserker the stench of poison was obvious. "I think he'll be all right. If it's what I think it is, he would be dead by now had the dose been strong enough. It must have been diluted somehow."

"Who would poison Quinn? Everybody likes Quinn." She unwittingly echoed

Hatchard's words.

"I know, lass. Everyone keeps telling me that," Grimm said drolly.

"Ramsay is ill!" Kaley's words echoed down the corridor. "Someone come help me! I can't hold him down!"

Grimm looked toward the hall, then back at Quinn, clearly torn. "Go to Kaley, lass. I can't leave him," he said through his teeth. Some might consider him paranoid, but if his suspicions were correct, it was supposed to have been him lying in a pile of his own vomit, dead.

An ashen-faced Jillian complied quickly.

Biting back a curse, Grimm daubed at Quinn's forehead and sat back to wait for the physician.

* * * * *

The physician arrived, carrying two large satchels and dashing rain from the thinning web of hair that crowned his pate. After questioning nearly everyone in the inn, he conceded to inspect the patients. Moving with surprising grace for such a rotund man, he paced to and fro, scribbling notes in a tiny book. After peering into their eyes, inspecting their tongues, and prodding their distended abdomens, he retreated to the pages of his tiny booklet.

"Give them barley water stewed with figs, honey, and licorice," he instructed after several moments of flipping pages in thoughtful silence. "Nothing else, you understand, for it won't be digested. The stomach is a cauldron in which food is simmered. While their humors are out of balance, nothing can be cooked, and anything with substance will come back up," the physician informed them. "Liquids only."

"Will they be all right?" Jillian asked worriedly. They'd moved the two men into a clean room adjoining Kaley's for easier tending.

The physician frowned, causing lines to fold his double chin as lugubriously as they creased his forehead. "I think they're out of danger. Neither of them appears to have consumed enough to kill him, but I suspect they'll be weak for some time. Lest they try to rise, you'll want to dilute this with water—it's mandrake." He proffered a small pouch. "Soak cloths in it and place them over their faces."

The physician struck a lecturing pose, tapping his quill against his booklet. "You must be certain to cover both their nostrils and mouths completely for several minutes. As they inhale, the vapors will penetrate the body and keep them asleep. The spirits recover faster if the humors rest undisturbed. You see, there are four humors and three spirits... ah, but forgive me, I'm quite certain you don't wish to hear all of that. Only one who studies with the zeal of a physician might find such facts fascinating." He snapped his booklet closed. "Do as I have instructed and they shall make a full recovery."

"No bleeding?" Hatchard blinked.

The physician snorted. "Fetch a barber if you have an enemy you wish to murder. Fetch a physician if you have an ill patient you wish to revive."

Grimm nodded vehement agreement and rose to escort the physician out.

"Oh, Quinn," Jillian said, and sighed, placing a hand on his clammy forehead. She fussed at his woolens, tucking them snugly around his fevered body.

Standing behind Jillian on one side of Quinn's bed, Kaley beamed at Hatchard, who was perched across the room, applying cool cloths to Ramsay's brow. *She will choose Quinn, didn't I tell you?* she mouthed silently.

Hatchard merely lifted a brow and rolled his eyes.

* * * * *

When Grimm checked on the men the following morning, their condition had improved; however, they were still sedated, and not in any condition to travel.

Kaley insisted on acquiring the wares the men had originally come for, so Grimm reluctantly agreed to escort Jillian to the fair. Once there, he rushed her through the stalls at a breakneck pace, despite her protests. When a blanket of fog rolled down from the mountains and sheathed Durrkesh in the afternoon, a relieved Grimm informed Jillian it was time to return to the inn.

Fog always made Grimm uneasy, which proved inconvenient, as Scotland was such foggy terrain. This wasn't a normal fog, however; it was a thick, wet cape of dense white clouds that lingered on the ground and swirled around their feet as they walked. By the time they left the market, he could scarcely see Jillian's face a few feet from him.

"I love this!" Jillian exclaimed, slicing her arms through the tendrils of mist, scattering them with her movement. "Fog has always seemed so romantic to me."

"Life has always seemed romantic to you, lass. You used to think Bertie down at the stables spelling your name in horse manure was romantic," he reminded dryly.

"I still do," she said indignantly. "He learned his letters for the express purpose of writing my name. I think that's very romantic." Her brow furrowed as she peered through the soupy mist.

"Obviously you've never had to fight a battle in this crap," he said irritably. Fog reminded him of Tuluth and irrevocable choices. "It's damned hard to kill a man when you can't see where you're slicing with your sword."

Jillian stopped abruptly. "Our lives are vastly different, aren't they?" she asked, suddenly sober. "You've killed many men, haven't you, Grimm Roderick?"

"You should know," he replied tersely. "You watched me do it."

Jillian nibbled her lip and studied him. "The McKane would have killed my family that day, Grimm. You protected us. If a man must kill to protect his clan, there is no sin in that."

Would that he could absolve himself with such generosity, he thought. She still had no idea that the McKane's attack had not been directed at her family. They'd come to Caithness that foggy day long ago only because they'd heard a Berserker might be in residence. She hadn't known that then, and apparently Gibraltar St. Clair had never revealed his secret.

"Why did you leave that night, Grimm?" Jillian asked carefully.

"I left because it was time," he said roughly, shoving a hand through his hair. "I'd learned all your father could teach me, and it was time to move on. There was nothing to hold me at Caithness any longer."

Jillian sighed. "Well, you should know that none of us ever blamed you, despite the fact that we knew you blamed yourself. Even dear Edmund vowed until his last that you were the most noble warrior he'd ever met." Jillian's eyes misted.

"We buried him under the apple tree, just as he'd asked," she added, mostly to herself. "I go there when the heather is blooming. He loved white heather."

Grimm stopped, startled. "Buried? Edmund? What?"

"Edmund. He wished to be buried under the apple tree. We used to play there, remember?"

His fingers closed around her wrist. "When did Edmund die? I thought he was with your brother Hugh in the Highlands."

"No. Edmund died shortly after you left. Nearly seven years ago."

"He was scarcely wounded when the McKane attacked," Grimm insisted. "Even your father said he'd easily recover!"

"He took an infection, then caught a lung complication on top of it," she replied, perplexed by his reaction. "The fever never abated. He wasn't in pain long, Grimm. And some of his last words were of you. He swore you defeated the McKane single-handedly and mumbled some nonsense about you being... what was it? A warrior of Odin's who could change shapes, or something like that. But then, Edmund was ever fanciful," she added with a faint smile.

Grimm stared at her through the fog.

"Wh-what?" Jillian stammered, confused by the intensity with which he studied her. When he stepped toward her, she backed up slightly, drawing nearer the stone wall that encircled the church behind her.

"What if creatures like that really existed, Jillian?" he asked, his blue eyes glittering. He knew he shouldn't tread on such dangerous territory, but here was a chance to discover her feelings without revealing himself.

"What do you mean?"

"What if it wasn't fantasy?" he pushed. "What if there really were men who could do the things Edmund spoke of? Men who were part mythical beast—endowed with special abilities, skilled in the art of war, almost invincible. What would you think of such a man?"

Jillian studied him intently. "What an odd question. Do *you* believe such warriors

exist, Grimm Roderick?"

"Hardly," he said tightly. "I believe in what I can see and touch and hold in my hand. The legend of the Berserkers is nothing more than a foolish tale told to frighten mischievous children into good behavior."

"Then why did you ask me what I would think if they did?" she persisted.

"It was just a hypothetical question. I was merely making conversation, and it was a stupid conversation. By Odin's spear, lass—*nobody* believes in Berserkers!" He resumed walking, gesturing with an impatient scowl for her to follow.

They walked a few yards in silence. Then, without preamble, Grimm said, "Is Ramsay a fine kisser?"

"*What?*" Jillian nearly fell over her own feet.

"Ramsay, peahen. Does he kiss well?" Grimm repeated irritably.

Jillian battled the urge to beam with delight. "Well," she drawled thoughtfully, "I haven't had much experience, but in all fairness I'd have to say his kiss was the best I've ever had."

Grimm instantly held her trapped her against him, between his hard body and the stone wall. He tilted her head back with a relentless hand beneath her chin. *By the saints, how could the man move so quickly? And how delicious that he did.*

"Let me help you put it in perspective, lass. But doona think for a minute this means anything. I'm just trying to help you understand there are better men out there. Think of this as a lesson, nothing more. I'd hate to see you wed to Logan simply because you thought he was the best kisser, when such a mistaken perception can be so easily remedied."

Jillian raised her hand to his lips, barring him the kiss he threatened. "I don't need a lesson, Grimm. I can make up my own mind. I loathe the thought of you putting yourself out, suffering on my behalf—"

"I'm willing to suffer a bit. Consider it a favor, since we were once childhood friends." He clasped her hand in his and tugged it away from his lips.

"You were never my friend," she reminded him sweetly. "You chased me away constantly—"

"Not the first year—"

"I thought you didn't remember anything about me or your time at Caithness. Isn't that what you told me? And I don't need any favors from you, Grimm Roderick. Besides, what makes you so certain your kiss will be better? Ramsay's positively took my breath away. I could scarcely stand when he was done," she lied shamelessly. "What if you kiss me and it's not as good as Ramsay's kiss? Then what reason would I have for not marrying him?" Having thrown the gauntlet, Jillian felt as smug as a cat as she waited for the breathtaking kiss she knew would follow.

His expression furious, he claimed her mouth with his.

And the earthquake began beneath his toes. Grimm groaned against her lips as the sensation stripped his waning control.

Jillian sighed and parted her lips.

She was being kissed by Grimm Roderick, and it was everything she'd remembered. The kiss they'd shared so long ago in the stables had seemed a mystical experience, and over the years she'd wondered if she glorified it in her mind, only imagining that it had rocked her entire world. But her memory had been accurate. Her body came alive, her lips tingled, her nipples hardened. She wanted every inch of his body, in every way possible. On top of her, beneath her, beside her, behind her. Hard, muscled, demanding—she knew he was man enough to sate the endless hunger she felt for him.

She twined her fingers in his hair and kissed him back, then lost her breath entirely when he deepened the kiss. One hand cupped her jaw; the other slid down the bow of her spine, cupping her hips, molding her body tightly against his. All thought ceased as Jillian gave herself over to what had long been her greatest fantasy: to touch Grimm Roderick as a woman, as his woman. His hands were at her hips, pushing at her gown—and suddenly her hands were at his kilt, tearing at his sporran to get beneath it. She found his thick manhood and brazenly grasped its hardness through the fabric of his plaid. She felt his body stiffen against hers, and the groan of desire that escaped him was the sweetest

sound Jillian had ever heard.

Something exploded between them, and there in the mist and fog of Durrkesh she was so consumed by the need to mate her man that she no longer cared that they stood on a public street. Grimm wanted her, wanted to make love to her—his body told her that clearly. She arched against him, encouraging, entreating. The kiss hadn't merely rendered her breathless, it had depleted the last of her meager supply of sense.

He caught her questing hand and pinned it against the wall above her head. Only when he had secured both her hands did he change the tempo of the kiss, turning it into a teasing, playful flicker of his tongue, probing, then withdrawing, until she was gasping for more. He brushed the length of his body against hers with the same slow, teasing rhythm.

He tore his lips away from hers with excruciating slowness, catching her lower lip between his teeth and tugging gently. Then, with a last luscious lick of his tongue, he drew back.

"So what do you think? Could Ramsay compare to *that*?" he asked hoarsely, eyeing her breasts intently. Only when he ascertained that they didn't rise and fall for a long moment, that he had indeed managed to "kiss her breathless," did he raise his eyes to hers.

Jillian swayed as she struggled to keep her knees from simply buckling beneath her. She stared at him blankly. Words? He thought she could form words after that? He thought she could *think*?

Grimm's gaze searched her face intently, and Jillian saw a look of smug satisfaction banked in his glittering eyes. The faintest hint of a smile curved his lip when she didn't reply but stood gazing, lips swollen, eyes round. "Breathe, peahen. You can breathe now."

Still, she stared at him blankly. Valiantly she sucked in a great, whistling breath of air.

"Hmmp" was all he said as he took her hand and tugged her along. She trotted beside him on rubbery legs, occasionally stealing a peek at the supremely masculine expression of satisfaction on his face.

Grimm didn't speak another word for the duration of their walk back to the inn. That was fine with Jillian; she wasn't certain she could have formed a complete sentence if her life had depended on it. She briefly wondered who, if either of them, had won that skirmish. She concluded weakly that she had. He hadn't been unaffected by their encounter, and she'd gotten the kiss she craved.

When they arrived at the Black Boot, Hatchard informed the strangely taciturn couple that the men, although still quite weak, were impatient to be moved out of the inn. Analyzing all the risks, Hatchard had concurred that it was the wisest course. He had procured a wagon for the purpose, and they would return to Caithness at first light.

CHAPTER 14

"TELL ME A STORY, JILLIAN," ZEKE DEMANDED, ambling into the solar. "I sore missed you and Mama while you were away." The little boy clambered up onto the settle beside her and nestled in her arms.

Jillian brushed his hair back from his forehead and dropped a kiss on it. "What shall it be, my sweet Zeke? Dragons? Fairies? The selkie?"

"Tell me about the Berserkers," he said decidedly.

"The what?"

"The Berserkers," Zeke said patiently. "You know, the mighty warriors of Odin."

Jillian snorted delicately. "What is it with boys and their battles? My brothers adored that fairy tale."

"'Tis not a fae-tale, 'tis true," Zeke informed her. "Mama told me they still prowl the Highlands."

"Nonsense," Jillian said. "I shall tell you a fitting tale for a young boy."

"I don't want a fitting tale. I want a story with knights and heroes and quests. And Berserkers."

"Oh my, you are growing up, aren't you?" Jillian said wryly, tousling his hair.

"Course I am," Zeke said indignantly.

"No Berserkers. I shall tell you, instead, of the boy and the nettles."

"Is this another one of your stories with *a point*?" Zeke complained.

Jillian sniffed. "There's nothing wrong with stories that have a point."

"Fine. Tell me about the stupid nettles." He plunked his chin on his fist and glowered.

Jillian laughed at his sullen expression. "I'll tell you what, Zeke. I shall tell you a story with a point, and then you may go find Grimm and ask him to tell you the

story of your fearless warriors. I'm certain he knows it. He's the most fearless man I've ever met," Jillian added with a sigh. "Here we go. Pay attention:

"Once upon time there was a wee lad who was walking through the forest and came upon a patch of nettles. Fascinated by the unusual cluster, he tried to pluck it so he might take it home and show his mama. The plant stung him painfully, and he raced home, his fingers stinging. 'I scarcely touched it, Mama!' the lad cried.

"That is exactly why it stung you,' his mama replied. 'The next time you touch a nettle, grab it boldly, and it will be soft as silk in your hand and not hurt you in the least.' " Jillian paused meaningfully.

"That's ft?" Zeke demanded, outraged. "That wasn't a *story*! You *cheated* me!"

Jillian bit her lip to prevent laughter; he looked like an offended little bear cub. She was tired from the journey and her storytelling abilities were a bit weak at the moment, but there was a useful lesson in it. Besides, the largest part of her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the incredible kiss she'd received yesterday. It required every shred of her waning self-control to keep from trundling off to find Grimm herself, nestling on his lap and sweetly begging for a bedtime story. Or, more accurately, just a bedtime. "Tell me what it means, Zeke," Jillian coaxed.

Zeke was quiet a moment as he pondered the fable. His forehead was furrowed in concentration, and Jillian waited patiently. Of all the children, Zeke was the cleverest at isolating the moral. "I have it!" he exclaimed. "I shouldna hesitate. I should grab things boldly. If you're undecided, things may sting you."

"Whatever you do, Zeke," Jillian counseled, "do it with all your might."

"Like learning to ride," he concluded.

"Yes. And loving your mama and working with the horses and studying lessons I give you. If you don't do things with all your might, you may end up being harmed by those things you try halfway."

Zeke gave a disgruntled snort. "Well, it's not the Berserker, but I guess it's all right, from a girl."

Jillian made an exasperated sound and hugged Zeke close, heedless of his impatient squirm. "I'm losing you already, aren't I, Zeke?" she asked when the boy raced from the solar in search of Grimm. "How many lads will grow up on me?" she murmured sadly.

* * * * *

Jillian checked on Quinn and Ramsay before dinner. The two men were sleeping soundly, exhausted by the return trip to Caithness. She hadn't seen Grimm since their return; he'd settled the patients and stalked off. He'd been silent the entire journey and, stung by his withdrawal, she had retreated to the wagon and ridden with the sick men.

Both Quinn and Ramsay still had an unhealthy pallor, and their clammy skin was evidence of the fever's tenacious grip. She pressed a gentle kiss to Quinn's brow and tucked the woolens beneath his chin.

As she left their chambers, her mind slipped back in time to the summer when she'd been nearly sixteen—the summer Grimm left Caithness.

Nothing in her life had prepared Jillian for such a gruesome battle. Neither death nor brutality had visited her sheltered life before, but on that day both came stampeding in on great black chargers wearing the colors of the McKane.

The moment the guards had sounded the alarm her father had barricaded her in her bedroom. Jillian watched the bloody massacre unfolding in the ward below her window with disbelieving eyes. She was besieged by helplessness, frustrated by her inability to fight beside her brothers. But she knew, even had she been free to run the estate, she wasn't strong enough to wield a sword. What harm could she, a mere lass, hope to wreak upon hardened warriors like the McKane?

The sight of so much blood terrified her. When a crafty McKane crept up behind Edmund, taking him unawares, she screamed and pounded her fists against the window, but what meager noise she managed to make could not compete with the raucous din of battle. The burly McKane crushed her brother to the ground with the flat of his battle-ax.

Jillian flattened herself against the glass, clawing hysterically at the pane with her nails as if she might break through and snatch him from danger. A deep shuddering breath of relief burst from her lungs when Grimm burst into the fray,

dispatching the snarling McKane before Edmund suffered another brutal blow. As she watched her wounded brother struggle to crawl to his knees, something deep within her altered so swiftly that she scarce was aware of it: the blood no longer horrified Jillian—nay, she longed to see every last drop of McKane blood spilled upon Caithness's soil. When a raging Grimm proceeded to slay every McKane within fifty yards, it seemed to her a thing of terrible beauty. She'd never seen a man move with such incredible speed and lethal grace—warring to protect all that was nearest to her heart.

After the battle Jillian was lost in the shuffle as her family fretted over Edmund, tended the wounded, and buried the dead. Feeling dreadfully young and vulnerable, she waited on the rooftop for Grimm to respond to her note, only to glimpse him toting his packs toward the stable.

She was stunned. He couldn't leave. Not now! Not when she was so confused and frightened by all that had transpired. She needed him now more than ever.

Jillian raced to the stables as swiftly as her feet could carry her. But Grimm was obdurate; he bid her an icy farewell and turned to leave. His failure to comfort her was the final slight she could endure—she flung herself into his arms, demanding with her body that he shelter her and keep her safe.

The kiss that began as an innocent press of lips swiftly became the confirmation of her most secret dreams: Grimm Roderick was the man she would marry.

As her heart filled with elation, he pulled away from her and turned abruptly to his horse, as if their kiss had meant nothing to him. Jillian was shamed and bewildered by his rejection, and the frightening intensity of so many new emotions filled her with desperation.

"You can't leave! Not after *that*!" she cried.

"I must leave," he growled. "And *that*"—he wiped his mouth furiously—"should never have happened!"

"But it did! And what if you don't come back, Grimm? What if I never see you again?"

"That's precisely what I mean to do," he said fiercely. "You're not even sixteen. You'll find a husband. You'll have a bright future."

"I've already found my husband!" Jillian wailed. "You *kissed* me!"

"A kiss is not a pledge of marriage!" he snarled. "And it was a mistake. I never should have done it, but you threw yourself at me. What else did you expect me to do?"

"Y-you didn't want to k-kiss me?" Her eyes darkened with pain.

"I'm a man, Jillian. When a woman throws herself at me, I'm as human as the next!"

"You mean you didn't feel it too?" she gasped.

"Feel what?" he snorted. "Lust? Of course. You're a bonny lass."

Jillian shook her head, mortified. Could she have been so mistaken? Could it truly have been only in her mind? "No, I mean—didn't you feel like the world was a perfect place and... and we were meant to be..." She trailed off, feeling like the grandest fool.

"Forget about me, Jillian St. Clair. Grow up, marry a handsome laird, and forget about me," Grimm said stonily. With one swift move he tossed himself on the horse's back and sped from the stables.

"Don't leave me, Grimm Roderick! Don't leave me like this! I love you!"

But he rode off as if she hadn't spoken. Jillian knew that he'd heard her every word, though she wished he hadn't. She'd not only flung her body at a man who didn't want her, she'd flung her heart after him as he left.

Jillian sighed heavily and closed her eyes. It was a bitter memory, but the sting had eased somewhat since Durrkesh. She no longer believed she had been mistaken about how the kiss had affected them, for in Durrkesh the same thing had happened and she'd seen in his eyes with a woman's sure knowledge that he'd felt it too.

Now all she had to do was get him to admit it.

CHAPTER 15

AFTER SEARCHING FOR OVER AN HOUR, JILLIAN TRACKED Grimm down in the armory. He was standing near a low wooden table, examining several blades, but she could tell he sensed her presence by the stiffening of his back.

"When I was seventeen, I was near Edinburgh," Jillian informed his rigid back. "I thought I glimpsed you while I was visiting the Hammonds."

"Yes," Grimm replied, intently inspecting a hammered shield.

"It *was* you! I knew it!" Jillian exclaimed. "You were standing near the gatehouse. You were watching me and you looked... unhappy."

"Yes," he admitted tightly.

Jillian gazed at Grimm's broad back a moment, uncertain how to vocalize her feelings. It might have helped immensely if she'd understood herself what she wanted to say, but she didn't. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, because he turned and brushed past her with a cool expression that dared her to humble herself by following him. She didn't.

* * * * *

She found him later, in the kitchen, scooping a handful of sugar into his pocket.

"For Occam," he said defensively.

"The night I went to the Glannises' ball near Edinburgh," Jillian continued the conversation where, in ha mind, it had recently ended, "it was you in the shadows, wasn't it? The fall I turned eighteen."

Grimm sighed heavily. She'd found him yet again. The lass seemed to have a way of knowing where he was, when, and if he was alone. He eyed her with resignation. "Yes," he replied evenly. *That's the fall you became a woman, Jillian. You were wearing ruby velvet. Your hair was uncurled and cascading over your shoulders. Your brothers were so proud of you. I was stunned.*

"When that rogue Alastair—and do you know, I came to find out later he was

married—took me outside and kissed me, I heard a dreadful racket in the bushes. He said it was likely a ferocious animal."

"And then he told how grateful you should be that you had him to protect you, right?" Grimm mocked. *I almost killed the bastard for touching you.*

"That's not funny. I was truly frightened."

"Were you really, Jillian?" Grimm regarded her levelly. "By which? The man holding you, or the beast in the bush?"

Jillian met his gaze and licked her lips, which were suddenly dry. "Not the beast. Alastair was a blackguard, and had he not been discomfited by the noise, the saints only know what he might have done to me. I was young and, God, I was so innocent!"

"Yes."

"Quinn asked me to marry him today," she announced, watching him carefully.

Grimm was silent.

"I haven't kissed him yet, so I don't know if he's a better kisser. Do you suppose he will be? Better than you, I mean?"

Grimm did not reply.

"Grimm? Will he be a better kisser than you?"

A low rumble filled the air. "Yes, Jillian." Grimm sighed, and went off to find his horse.

* * * * *

Grimm managed to elude her for almost an entire day. It was late at night before she finally managed to intercept him as he was leaving the ill men's chambers.

"You know, even when I wasn't sure you were really there, I still felt... safe. Because you *might be* there."

The hint of an approving smile curved his lips. "Yes, Jillian."

Jillian turned away.

"Jillian?"

She froze.

"Have you kissed Quinn yet?"

"No, Grimm."

"Oh. Well, you'd better get on it, lass."

Jillian scowled.

* * * * *

"I saw you at the Royal Bazaar." Finally Jillian had succeeded in getting him all to herself for more than a few forced moments. With Quinn and Ramsay confined to bed, she'd asked Grimm to join her for dinner in the Greathall and had been astonished when he'd readily consented. She sat on one side of the long table, peering at his darkly handsome face through the vines of a candelabrum that held dozens of flickering tapers. They'd been dining in silence, broken only by the clatter of plates and goblets. The maids had retreated to deliver broth to the men upstairs. Three days had passed since they'd returned, during which she'd tried desperately to recapture the tenderness she'd glimpsed in Durrkesh, to no avail. She hadn't been able to get him to stand still long enough to try for another kiss.

Nothing in his face moved. Not a lash flickered. "Yes." If he answered her with one more annoyingly evasive "yes," she might fly into a rage. She wanted answers. She wanted to know what really went on inside Grimm's head, inside his heart. She wanted to know if the single kiss they'd shared had tilted his world with the same catastrophic force that had leveled hers. "You were spying on me," Jillian accused, peeping through the candles with a scowl. "I wasn't being truthful when I said it made me feel safe. It made me angry," she lied.

Grimm picked up a pewter goblet of wine, drained it, and carefully rolled the cold metal between his palms. Jillian watched his precise, controlled motion and was overwhelmed with hatred for all deliberate actions. Her life had been lived that way, one cautious, precise choice after another, with the exception of when she was around Grimm. She wanted to see him act like she felt: out of control, emotional. Let *him* have an outburst or two. She didn't want kisses offered on the

weak excuse of saving her from bad choices. She needed to know she could get beneath his skin the way he penetrated hers. Her hands fisted in her lap, scrunching the fabric of her gown between her fingers.

What would he do if she quit trying to be civil and collected?

She drew a deep breath. "Why did you keep watching me? Why did you leave Caithness, only to follow me all those times?" she demanded with more vehemence than she'd intended, and her words echoed off the stone walls.

Grimm didn't take his eyes from the polished pewter between his palms. "I had to see that all was well with you, Jillian," he said quietly. "Have you kissed Quinn yet?"

"You never breathed a word to me! You'd just come and look at me, and then I'd turn around and you'd be gone."

"I took a vow to keep you from harm, Jillian. It was only natural that I should check on you when you were nearby. Have you kissed Quinn yet?" he demanded.

"Keep me from harm?" Her voice soared with disbelief. "You failed! *You* hurt me worse than anything else ever has in my entire life!"

"*Have you kissed Quinn yet?*" he roared.

"No! I haven't kissed Quinn yet!" she shouted back. "Is that all you care about? You don't give a damn that *you* hurt *me*."

The goblet clattered to the floor as Grimm lunged to his feet. His hands came down with unbridled fury. Trenchers flew from the table, untouched pottage stew showered the room, chunks of flatbread bounced off the hearth. The candelabrum exploded into the wall and stuck like a cleft foot between the stones. Soapy white candles rained down upon the floor. His rampage didn't stop until the table between them had been swept clean. He paused, panting, his hands splayed wide on the edge of the table, his eyes feverishly bright. Jillian stared at him, stunned.

With a howl of rage, he crashed his hands into the center of six inches of solid oak, and Jillian's hand flew to her throat to smother a cry when the long table

split down the middle. His blue eyes blazed incandescently, and she could have sworn he seemed to be growing larger, broader, and more dangerous. She'd certainly gotten the reaction she'd been seeking, and more.

"I know I failed!" he roared. "I know I hurt you! Do you think I haven't had to live with that knowledge?"

Between them, the table creaked and shuddered in an effort to remain whole. The wounded slab tilted precariously. Then, with a groan of defeat, the ends slumped toward the center and it crashed to the floor.

Jillian blinked as she surveyed the wreckage of their meal. No longer seeking to provoke him, she stood dumbfounded by the intensity of his reaction. He knew he'd hurt her? And he cared enough to get this angry at the memory?

"Then why did you come back now?" she whispered. "You could have disobeyed my da."

"I had to see that all is well with you, Jillian," he whispered back across the sea of destruction that separated them.

"I'm well, Grimm," she said carefully. "That means you can go away now," she said, not meaning a breath of it.

Her words evoked no response.

How could a man stand so still that she might think he had been cursed to stone? She couldn't even see his chest rise and fall as she watched him. The breeze blowing in the tall window didn't ruffle him. Nothing touched the man.

God knows she'd never been able to. Hadn't she learned that by now? She'd never been able to reach the real Grimm, the one she'd known that first summer. Why had she believed anything might have changed? Because she was a woman grown? Because she had full breasts and shiny hair and she thought she could entice him near with a man's weakness for a woman? And since he was so damned indifferent to her, why did she even want him?

But Jillian knew the answer to that, even if she didn't understand the how of it. When she'd been a wee lass and tipped her head back to see the wild boy towering above her, her heart had cried welcome. There had been an ancient

knowing in her child's breast that had clearly told her no matter what heinous things Grimm stood accused of, she could trust him with her life. She knew he was supposed to belong to her.

"Why don't you just cooperate?" Frustration peeled the words from her lips; she couldn't believe she'd spoken them aloud, but once they were out, she was committed.

"What?"

"Cooperate," she encouraged. "It means to go along. To be obliging."

Grimm stared. "I canna oblige you by leaving. Your da—"

"I am not asking you to leave," she said gently.

Jillian had no idea where she drew her courage from at that moment; she knew only that she was tired of wanting, and tired of being denied. So she stood proudly, moving her body exactly the way it felt whenever Grimm was in the same room: seductive, intense, more alive than at any other time in her life. Her body language must have signified her intent, for he went rigid.

"How would you have me cooperate, Jillian?" he asked in a flat, dead voice.

She approached him, carefully picking her way over broken platters and food. Slowly, as if he were a wild animal, she reached her hand, palm out, toward his chest. He stared at it with a mixture of fascination and mistrust as she placed it upon his chest, over his heart. She felt the heat of him through his linen shirt, felt his body shudder, felt the powerful beating of his heart beneath her palm.

She tilted her head back and gazed up at him. "If you'd truly like to cooperate"—she wet her lips—"kiss me."

It was with a furious gaze that he watched her, but in his eyes Jillian glimpsed the heat he struggled to hide.

"Kiss me," she whispered, never taking her eyes from his. "Kiss me and *then* try to tell me that you don't feel it too."

"Stop it," he ordered hoarsely, backing away.

"Kiss me, Grimm! And not because you think you're doing me a 'favor'! Kiss me because you want to! Once you told me you wouldn't because I was a child. Well, I'm no longer a child, but a woman grown. Other men wish to kiss me. Why not you?"

"It isn't like that, Jillian." Both hands moved in frustration to his hair. He buried his fingers deep, then yanked the leather thong off and cast it to the stones.

"Then what is it? Why do Quinn and Ramsay and every other man I've ever known want me, but not you? *Must* I choose one of them? Is it Quinn I should be asking to kiss me? To bed me? To make me a woman?"

He growled, a low warning rumble in his throat. "Stop it, Jillian!"

Jillian tossed her head in a timeless gesture of temptation and defiance. "Kiss me, Grimm, *please*. Just *once*, as if you mean it."

He sprang with such grace and speed that she had no warning. His hands sunk into her hair, pinning her head between his palms and arching her neck back. His lips covered hers and he took the breath from her lungs.

His lips moved over hers with unrestrained hunger, but in the bruising crush of his mouth she sensed a touch of anger—an element she didn't understand. How could he be angry with her when it was so apparent that he'd wanted desperately to kiss her? Of that she was certain. The instant his lips had claimed hers, any doubts she'd previously suffered were permanently laid to rest. She could feel his desire struggling just beneath his skin, waging a mighty battle against his will. *And losing*, she thought smugly as his grip on her hair gentled enough for him to tilt her head, allowing his tongue deeper access to her mouth.

Jillian softened against him, clung to his shoulders, and gave herself over to dizzying waves of sensation. How could a simple kiss resonate in every inch of her body and make it seem the floor was tilting wildly beneath her feet? She kissed him back eagerly and fiercely. After so many years of wanting him, she finally had her answer. Grimm Roderick needed to touch her with the same undeniable need she felt for him.

And she knew that with Grimm Roderick—just once would *never* be enough.

CHAPTER 16

THE KISS SPUN OUT AND DEEPENED. IT WAS FUELED BY years of denied emotion, years of disavowed passion that swiftly clawed to the surface of Grimm's resolve. Standing in the Greathall amidst the wreckage of a feast, kissing Jillian, he realized he hadn't just been denying himself peace, he'd been denying himself life. For this was life, this exquisite moment of blending. His Berserker senses were overwhelmed, stupefied by the taste and touch of Jillian. He exulted in the kiss, becoming a bacchanalian worshiper of her lips as he slipped his hands through her hair, following the silken skein down her back.

He kissed Jillian as he'd never kissed any other woman, driven by hunger sprung from the most profane and the most sacred depths of his soul. He wanted her instinctively and would worship her with the primitiveness of his need. The press of her lips thawed the man, the questing probe of her tongue tamed and humbled the icy Viking warrior who had known no warmth until this moment. Desire flattened all his objections and he crushed her body against his, taking her tongue into his mouth as deeply as he knew she would welcome his body into hers.

They slipped and slid on the bits of food scattered across the stones, stopping only at the stability of the wall. Without lifting his mouth from hers, Grimm slid a hand beneath her hips, braced her shoulders against the wall, and drew her legs around his waist. Years of watching her, forbidding himself to touch her, culminated in a display of frenzied passion. Urgency dictated his movements, not patience or skill. His hands slipped from her ankles as her arms entwined his neck and he pushed her gown up and over her calves, revealing her long, lovely legs. He caressed her skin, groaning against her lips when his thumbs found the soft skin of her inner thighs.

The kiss deepened as he took her mouth the same way he'd laid siege to castles: persistently, ruthlessly, and with single-minded focus. There was only Jillian, warm woman in his hands, warm tongue in his mouth, and she matched him, each wordless demand of his body met by hers. She buried her hands in his hair and kissed him back until he was almost breathless himself. Years of need crashed over him as his hands found her breasts and palmed their curves. Her nipples were hard and peaked; he needed more than her lips—he needed to taste

every crevice and hollow of her body.

Cradling his face in her hands with a surprisingly strong grip, Jillian forced him to break the kiss. Grimm stared into her eyes, as if to scry the hidden meaning of her gesture. When she tugged his head down to the curve of her breast, he went willingly. He traced a reverent path with his tongue from peak to peak, tugging gently with his teeth before closing his lips on her nipple.

Jillian cried out in abandon and submission, a breathless sound of capitulation to her own desire. She thrust herself so firmly against his hips that the warm hollow between her thighs snugly fitted him with the sensuous finesse of a velvet glove. The barriers between them incensed him, and ripping his kilt from his waist, he eased her gown aside.

Stop! His mind screamed. She's virgin! Not like this!

Jillian moaned and rubbed against him.

"Stop," he whispered hoarsely.

Jillian's eyes slitted open. "Not a chance in hell," she said smugly, a smile curving her lower lip.

Her words ripped through him like a heated iron, raising his blood from molten to boiling. He could feel the beast inside him move, yawning with wicked wakefulness.

The Berserker? Now? There was no blood anywhere... yet. What would happen when there was?

"Touch me, Grimm. Here." Jillian placed his hand on her breast and drew his head to hers. He groaned and shifted, rubbing in slow, erotic circles against her open thighs. Dimly he realized that the Berserker was rousing into full awareness, but it was somehow different—not violent, but aroused, violently hard, and violently hungry for every taste of Jillian it could have.

He would have laid her back upon the table, but there was no longer a table, so instead he lowered them both into a chair. He shifted so her legs dangled over its arms, and she sat facing him, her hands on his shoulders, her womanhood bared above him. She needed no encouragement to press herself against him, teasing

him with the brush of her peaked nipples across his chest. Jillian dropped her head back, baring the slender arch of her neck, and Grimm froze a long moment, drinking in the vision of his lovely Jillian straddling his lap, her narrow waist curving into those lush hips. Although he'd managed to slide her gown from her shoulders, the fabric pooled at her waist, and she was a goddess rising from a sea of silk.

"Christ, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!"

Jillian's head whipped back, and she stared at him. Her look of disbelief quickly became a look of simple pleasure, then an expression of mischievous sensuality. "When I was thirteen," she said, running her fingers down the arrogant curve of his jaw, "I watched you with a maid and I vowed to myself that one day I would do everything to you that she did. Every kiss." She dropped her mouth to his nipple. Her tongue flicked out as she tasted his skin. "Every touch"—she slipped her hand down his abdomen to his hard shaft—"and every taste."

Grimm groaned and grabbed her hand, preventing her fingers from curling around him. If her lovely hand so much as locked around him one time, he would lose control and be inside her in a heartbeat. Calling upon every ounce of his legendary discipline, he held his body away. He refused to hurt her like that. A confession of his own spilled from his lips. "From the day you began to mature, you drove me crazy. I couldn't close my eyes at night without wanting you beneath me. Without wanting to be beside you, *inside* you. Jillian St. Clair, I hope you're as tough as you like to believe you are, because you're going to need every ounce of strength you possess for me tonight." He kissed her, silencing any reply she might have made.

She melted into his kiss until he pulled back. He regarded her tenderly. "And Jillian," he said softly, "I feel it too. I always did."

His words flung open her heart, and the smile she gave him was dazzling. "I *knew* it!" she breathed.

As his hands slid over her heated skin, Jillian abandoned herself to the sensation. When he palmed her between her thighs, she cried out softly and her body bucked against his hand. "More, Grimm. Give me more," she whispered.

His eyes narrowed as he watched her. Pleasure mingled with amazement and

desire on her expressive features. He knew he was large, both in width and length, and she needed to be prepared. When she began to move wildly against his hand, he could deny himself no longer. He positioned her above him. "You're in control this way, Jillian. It will hurt you, but you're in control. If it hurts too much, tell me," he said fiercely.

"It's all right, Grimm. I know it will hurt at first, but Kaley told me that if the man is a skilled lover, he will make me feel something more incredible than I've ever felt."

"*Kaley* told you that?"

Jillian nodded. "Please," she breathed. "Show me what she meant."

Grimm expelled a fascinated breath. His Jillian had no fear. He gently slipped the head of his shaft inside her and eased her down, gauging her every flicker of emotion.

Her eyes flared. Her hand flew down to curl around his shaft. "Big," she said worriedly. "Really big. Are you certain this works?"

A grin of pure delight curved his lip. "Very big," he agreed. "But just right to pleasure a woman." He slipped into her carefully. When he met the resistance of the barrier, he paused. Jillian panted softly. "Now, Grimm. Do it."

He closed his eyes briefly and cupped his hands on her bottom, positioning her above him. When he opened his eyes, resolve glimmered in their depths. With one firm thrust he pierced the barrier.

Jillian gasped. "That wasn't so bad," she breathed after a moment. "I thought it would really hurt." When he began to move slowly, her eyes flared. "Oh!"

She cried out, and he silenced her with a kiss. Moving slowly, he rocked her against him until any trace of pain in her wide eyes disappeared and her face was illuminated by the anticipation of what she sensed was dancing just out of her reach. She initiated an erotic, circular movement with her hips, nipping her lower lip between her teeth.

He watched her, entranced by her innate sensuality. She was abandoned, uninhibited, plunging wholly into their intimate play without reservation. Her

lips curved deliciously as a long slow thrust of his hips hinted at the passion to come, and he smiled with wicked delight.

He raised her up and switched places with her, placing her on the chair. Kneeling, he pulled her forward, wrapped her legs around his waist, and slid deep within her, pressing with exquisite friction against the mysterious place deep inside her that would cast her over the edge. He teased the nub between her legs until she squirmed against him, begging with her body for what only he could give her.

The Berserker exulted within him, frolicking in a way he had never thought possible.

When she cried out and shuddered against him, Grimm Roderick made a husky, rich sound that was more than laughter; it was the resonant knell of liberation. His triumph quickly became a groan of release. The sensation of her body shuddering around him so tightly was more than he could resist, and he exploded inside her.

Jillian clung to him, gasping as an unfamiliar sound penetrated her reeling mind. Her muscles fused to molten uselessness, her head fell forward, and she peered through her hair at the nude warrior-man kneeling before her.

"Y-you can laugh! Really, truly laugh!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

He traced his thumbs up the inside of her thighs, over the light skein of blood. Blood of her virginity marked her pale thighs. "Jillian, I... I... oh..."

"Don't freeze up on me, Grimm Roderick," Jillian said instantly.

He began shaking violently. "I can't help it," he said tightly, knowing they weren't talking about the same thing at all. "The Greathall," he muttered. "I am such an ass. I am so damned—"

"Stop it!" Jillian grabbed his head with both hands, leveling him with a furious look. "I wanted this," she said intensely. "I waited for this, I needed this. Don't you dare regret it! I don't, and I never will."

Grimm froze, transfixed by the blood that marked her thighs, waiting for the sensation of lost time to begin. It wouldn't be long before the darkness claimed

him and the violence ensued.

But moments ticked by, and it didn't happen. Despite the raging energy that flooded his body, the madness never came.

He gazed at her, dumbfounded. The beast within him was fully awakened, yet tame. How could that be? No bloodlust, no need for violence, all the good things the Berserker brought—and none of the danger.

"Jillian," he breathed reverently.

CHAPTER 17

"HOW ARE YOU FEELING?" GRIMM ASKED QUIETLY.

Punching the pillows, he maneuvered Quinn to a sitting position. The window fittings were tied loosely back, swags framed the casements, and the crescent moon cast enough light that his heightened vision allowed him to function as if it were broad daylight.

Quinn blinked groggily at Grimm and peered through the gloom. "Please don't." He groaned when Grimm reached for a cloth.

Grimm stopped in mid-reach. "Doona what? I was merely going to wipe your brow."

"Don't smother me with any more of that blasted mandrake," Quinn muttered. "Half the reason I feel so lousy is because Kaley keeps knocking me out."

One bed over, Ramsay rumbled assent. "Don't let her make us sleep anymore, man. My head is splitting from that crap and my tongue feels as if some wee furry beastie crawled in, kicked over on its back, and died there. Three days ago. And now it's rotting—"

"Enough! Do you have to be so descriptive?" Quinn made a face of disgust as his empty stomach heaved.

Grimm raised his hands in a gesture of assent. "No more mandrake. I promise. So how are you two feeling?"

"Like bloody hell," Ramsay groaned. "Light a candle, would you? I can't see a thing. What happened? Who poisoned us?"

A dark expression flitted across Grimm's face. He stepped into the hallway to light a taper, then lit several candles by the bedside and returned to his seat. "I suspect it was meant for me, and my guess is the poison was in the chicken."

"The chicken?" Quinn exclaimed, wincing as he sat up straight. "Didn't the barkeep bring it? Why would the barkeep try to poison you?"

"I doona think it was the barkeep. I think it was the butcher's attempt at revenge. My theory is that if either of you had consumed the entire basket, you would have died. It was intended for me. But the two of you split it."

"That doesn't make any sense if the butcher meant it for you, Grimm," Quinn protested. "He'd seen you in action. Any man knows you can't poison a Ber—"

"Bastard as ornery as myself," Grimm roared, drowning out Quinn's last word before Ramsay heard it.

Ramsay clutched his head. "Och, man, quit bellowing! You're killing me."

Quinn mouthed a silent "sorry" at Grimm, followed by an apologetic whisper: "It's the lingering effects of the mandrake. I'm stupid right now."

"Eh? What?" Ramsay said. "What are you two whispering about?"

"Even between the two of us we didn't even eat all the chicken," Quinn continued, evading Ramsay's query. "And I thought the innkeeper dismissed the butcher after that incident. I asked him to do it myself."

"What incident?" Ramsay asked.

"Apparently not." Grimm ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

"Did you get his name?" Ramsay asked.

"Who? The innkeeper?" Quinn gave him a puzzled look.

"No, the butcher." Ramsay rolled his eyes.

"Why?" Quinn asked blankly.

"Because the bastard poisoned a Logan, you fool. That doesn't happen without recompense."

"No vengeance," Grimm warned. "Just forget it, Logan. I've seen what you do when you focus on vengeance. The two of you came out of this bungled attempt unharmed. That does not justify murdering a man, no matter how much he might deserve it for other things."

"Where's Jillian?" Quinn changed the subject quickly. "I have these foggy

memories of a goddess hovering over my bed."

Ramsay snorted. "Just because you think you were making some progress before we were both poisoned doesn't mean you've won her, de Moncreiffe."

Grimm winced inwardly and sat in pensive silence while Quinn and Ramsay argued back and forth about Jillian. The men were still at it some time later and didn't even notice when Grimm left the room.

* * * * *

Having spent the early hours of dawn with Quinn and Ramsay, Grimm checked in on Jillian, who was still sleeping soundly as he'd left her, curled on her side beneath a mound of blankets. He longed to ease himself into bed beside her, to experience the pleasure of waking up to the sensation of holding her in his arms, but he couldn't risk being seen leaving Jillian's chambers once the castle roused.

So, as morning broke over Caithness, he nodded to Ramsay, who'd managed to stumble down the stairs in search of solid food, whistled to Occam, and swung himself onto the stallion's bare back. He headed for the loch, intending to immerse his overheated body in icy water. The completion he'd experienced with Jillian had only whetted his appetite for her, and he was afraid if she so much as smiled at him today he would fall on her with all the slathering grace of a starved wolf. Years of denied passion were free, and he realized he possessed a hunger for Jillian that could never be sated.

He nudged Occam around a copse of trees and paused, savoring the quiet beauty of the morning. The loch rippled, a vast silvery mirror beneath rosy clouds. Lofty oaks waved black branches against the red sky.

Strains of a painfully off-key song carried faintly on the breeze, and Grimm circumvented the loch carefully, guiding his horse past sinkholes and rocky terrain, following the sound until, rounding a thick cluster of growth, he saw Zeke hunched near the water. The lad's legs were tucked up, his forearms resting on his knees, and he was rubbing his eyes.

Grimm drew Occam to a halt. Zeke was half crying the broken words of an old lullaby. Grimm wondered who had managed to hurt his feelings this early in the morning. He watched the lad, trying to decide what was the best way to approach him without offending the child's dignity. As he hesitated in the

shadows, any decision on his part was rendered obsolete as the crackling of brush and bracken alerted him to an intruder. He scanned the surrounding forest, but before he had detected the source, a snarling animal sprang from the woods a few feet behind Zeke. A great, mangy mountain cat burst onto the bank of the loch, thick white spittle foaming on its snout. It snarled, baring lethal white fangs. Zeke turned, and his song warbled to a stop. His eyes widened in horror.

Grimm instantly flung himself from Occam's back, yanked his *sgain dubh* from his thigh, and drew it across his hand, causing blood to well in his palm. In less than a heartbeat, the sight of the crimson beads roused the Viking warrior and set the Berserker free.

Moving with inhuman speed, he snatched Zeke up and tossed him on his stallion and smacked Occam on the rump. Then he did what he so despised... he lost time.

* * * * *

"Somebody help!" Zeke shrieked as he rode into the bailey on Occam's back. "You must help Grimm!"

Hatchard burst from the castle to find Zeke perched on Occam's back, hanging on to his mane with whitened knuckles. "Where?" he shouted.

"The loch! There's a crazed mountain cat and it almost ate me and he threw me on the horse and I rode by myself but it attacked Grimm and he's going to be hurt!"

Hatchard sped off for the loch, unaware of two other people who'd been alerted by the shouting and were hot on his heels.

* * * * *

Hatchard found Grimm standing motionless, a black shadow against the misty red sky. He was facing the water, standing amidst the scraps of what had once been an animal. His arms and face were covered with blood.

"Gavrael," Hatchard said quietly, using his real name in hopes of reaching the man within the beast.

Grimm did not reply. His chest rose and fell rapidly. His body was pumped up with the massive quantities of oxygen a Berserker inhaled to compensate for the

preternatural rage. The veins in his corded forearms pulsed dark blue against his skin, and, Hatchard marveled, he seemed twice as large as he normally was. Hatchard had seen Grimm in the thick of Berserker rage several times when he'd trained the fosterling, but the mature Grimm wore it far more dangerously than the stripling lad had.

"Gavrael Roderick Icarus McIlloch," Hatchard said. He approached him from the side, trying to enter Grimm's line of vision in as innocuous a manner as possible. Behind him, two figures stopped in the shadows of the forest. One of them gasped softly and echoed the name.

"Gavrael, it's me, Hatchard," Hatchard repeated gently.

Grimm turned and looked directly at the chief man-at-arms. The warrior's blue eyes were incandescent, glowing like banked coals, and Hatchard received a disconcerting lesson in what it felt like to have someone look straight through him.

A strangled noise behind him compelled Hatchard's attention. Turning, he realized Zeke had trailed him.

"Ohmigod," Zeke breathed. He trundled closer, peering intently at the ground, then paused mere inches from Grimm. His eyes widened enormously as he scanned the small bits of what had once been a rabid mountain cat, savage enough to shred a grown man and, driven by the blood sickness, mad enough to attempt it. His astonished gaze drifted upward to Grimm's brilliant blue eyes, and he nearly rose on his tiptoes, staring. "He's a Berserker!" Zeke breathed reverently. "Look, his eyes are glowing! They *do* exist!"

"Fetch Quinn, Zeke. Now," Hatchard commanded. "Bring *no one else but Quinn*, no matter what. Do you understand? And not a word of this to anyone!"

Zeke stole one last worshiping look. "Aye," he said, then fled to get Quinn.

CHAPTER 18

"I TRULY DOUBT HE RIPPED THE ANIMAL TO PIECES, Zeke. It isn't healthy to exaggerate," Jillian reprimanded, masking her amusement to protect the boy's sensitive feelings.

"I didn't exaggerate," Zeke said passionately, "I told the truth! I was down by the loch and a rabid mountain cat attacked me and Grimm threw me on his horse and caught the beastie in mid-leap and killed it with one flick o' his wrist! He's a Berserker, he is! I *knew* he was special! Hmmph!" The little boy snorted. "He doesn't need to be a puny laird—he's king o' the warriors! He's a legend!"

Hatchard took Zeke firmly by the arm and tugged him away from Jillian. "Go find your mother, lad, and do it *now*" He fixed Zeke with a glower that dared him to disobey, then snorted as the boy fled the room. He met Jillian's gaze and shrugged. "You know how wee lads are. They must have their fairy tales."

"Is Grimm all right?" Jillian asked breathlessly. Her entire body ached in a most pleasurable way. Every move was a subtle reminder of the things he'd done to her, the things she'd begged him to do before the night had ended.

"Right as rain," Hatchard replied dryly. "The animal was indeed rabid, but don't worry, it didn't manage to bite him."

"Did Grimm kill it?" A rabid mountain cat could decimate an entire herd of sheep in less than a fortnight. They wouldn't usually attack a man, but apparently Zeke had been small enough and the beast had been sick enough to try it.

"Yes," Hatchard replied tersely. "He and Quinn are burying it now," he lied with cool aplomb. There hadn't been enough left to bury, but neither love nor gold could have persuaded Hatchard to tell Jillian that. He winced inwardly. Had the infected mountain cat bitten Zeke even once, the boy would have been contaminated by the ferocious animal's blood sickness and died within days, foaming at the mouth in excruciating agony. Praise the saints Grimm had been there, and praise Odin for his special talents, or Caithness would have been singing funeral dirges and weeping.

"Zeke rode Occam all by himself," Jillian marveled aloud.

Hatchard glanced up and smiled faintly. "That he did, and it saved his life, milady."

Jillian's expression was thoughtful as she headed for the door. "If Grimm hadn't believed in the lad enough to try to teach him, Zeke might never have been able to escape."

"Where are you going?" Hatchard said quickly.

Jillian paused at the entrance. "Why, to find Grimm, of course." To tell him she was wrong to have doubted him. To see his face, to glimpse the newfound intimacy in his eyes.

"Milady, leave him be for a time. He and Quinn are talking and he needs to be alone."

In a flash Jillian felt thirteen again, excluded from the company of the man she loved. "Did he say that? That he needed to be alone?"

"He's washing up in the loch," Hatchard said. "Just give him time, all right?"

Jillian sighed. She would wait for him to come to her.

* * * * *

"Grimm, I didn't want to say anything before, but I paid that innkeeper a small fortune to get rid of the butcher," Quinn said as he paced the edge of the loch. Grimm rose from the icy water, finally clean again, and scowled at the remains of the animal.

Quinn caught his look and said, "Don't even start. You saved his life, Grimm. I won't hear one word of your self-loathing for being a Berserker. It's a gift, do you hear me? A gift!"

Grimm exhaled dismally and made no response.

Quinn continued where he'd left off. "As I was saying, I paid the man. If he didn't get rid of the butcher, then I'm going to be heading back to Durrkesh to get some answers."

Grimm waved his hand, dismissing Quinn's concern. "Doona bother, Quinn. It wasn't the butcher."

"What? What do you mean, it wasn't the butcher?"

"It wasn't even the chicken. It was the whisky."

Quinn blinked rapidly several times. "Then why did you say it was the chicken?"

"I trust *you*, Quinn. I doona know Ramsay. The poison was root of thmsynne. The root loses its poisonous properties if simmered, broiled, or roasted. It must be crushed and diluted, and its effect is enhanced by alcohol. Besides, I found the remainder of the bottle downstairs the next morning. Whoever it was wasn't very thorough."

"But I didn't drink any whisky with you," Quinn protested.

"You didn't know you drank whisky." Grimm gave him a wry, apologetic twist of his lips. "I dumped my final mug of whisky, poured from the drugged bottle, over the chicken to get rid of it because I was sick of drinking and getting ready to leave. The poison is odorless until digested, and even my senses couldn't pick it up. Once it mixes with the body's fluids, however, it takes on a noxious odor."

"Christ, man!" Quinn gave him a dark look. "Of all the luck. So who do you think did it?"

Grimm studied him intently. "I've given that a lot of thought over the past few days. The only thing I can conclude is that the McKane have ferreted me out again somehow."

"Don't they know poison doesn't work on a Berserker?"

"They've never succeeded in taking one alive to question."

"So they may not know what feats one of you is capable of? Even they don't know how to kill you?"

"Correct."

Quinn mulled this new information over a moment. Then his eyes clouded. "If that's the case, if the McKane have indeed found you again, Grimm, what's to stop them from following you to Caithness?" Quinn asked carefully. "Again."

Grimm raised his head with a stricken look.

* * * * *

Jillian didn't see Grimm the rest of the day. Quinn informed her that he'd gone riding and would likely not return until nightfall. Night came and the castle retired. Peering out the casement window, she spied Occam wandering the bailey. Grimm had returned.

Draping a plush woolen over her chemise, Jillian slipped from her chambers. The castle was quiet, its occupants sleeping.

"Jillian"

Jillian stopped in mid-step. She turned, suppressing her impatience. She needed to see Grimm, to touch him again, to investigate their newfound intimacy and to revel in her womanhood.

Kaley Twillow was hurrying down the corridor toward her, tugging a wrapper around her shoulders in the chilly air. The older woman's chestnut curls were unpinned and rumpled, and her face was flushed with sleep.

"I heard your door open," Kaley said. "Did you want something from the kitchen? You should have called for me. I'll be happy to get it for you. What did you want? Shall I prepare you a mug of warm milk? Some bread and honey?"

Jillian demurred and patted Kaley's shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, Kaley. You go back to bed. I'll get it."

"It's no problem. I was considering a snack myself." Worried eyes flickered over Jillian's impromptu robe of soft woolen.

"Kaley," Jillian tried again, "you needn't worry about me. I'll be fine. Really, I'm just a bit restless and—"

"You're going to see Grimm."

Jillian flushed. "I must. I need to speak with him. I can't sleep. There are things I must say—"

"That can't wait until the morning light?" Kaley eyed the sheer chemise peeking from beneath the woolen. "You're not even properly dressed," she said reprovingly. "If you find him clad in that, you'll get more than you bargained

for."

"You don't understand," Jillian said, sighing.

"Oh, but my dear lass, I do. I saw the remains of the Greathall this morning."

Jillian swallowed and said nothing.

"Shall we cut to the quick of it?" Kaley said tersely. "I'm not so old that I can't recall what it's like. I loved a man like him once. I understand what you're feeling, perhaps even more so than you do, so let me put it into plain words. Quinn is sexual. Ramsay Logan is sexual, and the power they exude promises a rollicking good time." Kaley took Jillian's hands in hers and regarded her soberly. "But Grimm Roderick, ah, he's an entirely different animal, he's not merely sexual. He drips sensual power, and Jillian, sensual power can reshape a woman."

"You *do* know what I mean!"

"I'm flesh and blood too, lass." Kaley laid a gentle hand against her cheek. "Jillian, I've watched you mature with pride, love, and lately a touch of fear. I'm proud because you have a good, fearless heart and a strong will. I'm fearful because your will can make you headstrong beyond compare. Heed my words before you commit yourself to a course that is irrevocable: Sexual men can be forgotten, but a sensual man lingers in a woman's heart forever."

"Oh, Kaley, it's too late," Jillian confessed. "He's in there already."

Kaley drew her into her arms. "I was afraid of that. Jillian, what if he leaves you? How will you handle that? How will you go on? A man like Quinn would never leave. A man like Grimm, well, the men who are larger than life are also the most dangerous to a woman. Grimm is unpredictable."

"Do you regret yours?"

"My what?"

"Your man like Grimm."

Kaley's features softened rapturously, and her expression was answer enough.

"And there you have it," Jillian pointed out gently. "Kaley, if I knew that I could only have a few nights in that man's arms or nothing, I would take those magic nights and use them to keep me warm for the rest of my life."

Kaley swallowed audibly, her eyes filled with empathy. She smiled faintly. "I understand, lass," she said finally.

"Good night, my dear Kaley. Go back to bed, and permit me the same sweet dreams you once dreamt yourself."

"I love you, lass," Kaley said gruffly.

"I love you too, Kaley," Jillian replied with a smile as she slipped down the corridor to find Grimm.

* * * * *

Jillian entered his chambers quietly. He wasn't there. She sighed, frustrated, and moved restlessly about his room. His chambers were spartan, as clean and disciplined as the man. Nothing was out of order except for a mussed pillow. Smiling, she stepped to the bed and picked it up to plump it. She pressed it to her face for a moment and inhaled his crisp masculine scent. Her smile faltered and became quiet wonder when she spied the tattered book the pillow had been concealing. *Aesop's Fables*. It was the illustrated manuscript she'd given him nearly a dozen years before, that first snowy Christmas they'd spent together. She dropped the pillow and gathered the manuscript, stroking it tenderly with her fingertips. The pages were frayed, the illustrations faded, and little notes and oddities peeked out from the binding. He'd been carrying it all these years, tucking in his mementos, much as she had done with her volume. She cradled it wonderingly. This book told her everything she needed to know. Grimm Roderick was a warrior, a hunter, a guard, an often hard man who carried a tattered copy of *Aesop's Fables* wherever he went, occasionally secreting dried flowers and verses between the pages. She flipped through, stopping at a note that had been crumpled and resmoothed dozens of times. *I will be on the roof at gloaming. I must speak to you tonight, Grimm!*

He'd never forgotten her.

Sensitive yet strong, capable yet vulnerable, earthy and sensual. She was hopelessly in love with him.

"I kept it."

Jillian spun around. Once again she hadn't heard a sound when he'd entered the room. He was framed in the doorway, his eyes dark and unreadable.

"I see that," she replied in a hushed voice.

He crossed the room and dropped himself into a chair before the fire, his back to her. Jillian stood, hugging the precious book to her chest in silence. They were so close to the intimacy she'd always wanted from him that she was afraid to break the spell with words.

"I can't believe you're not bombarding me with questions," he said carefully.
"Like why did I keep it?"

"Why did you keep it, Grimm?" she asked, but it really didn't matter why. He had carried it with him to this day, and that was enough.

"Come here, lass."

Jillian gently placed the book on a table and approached him slowly. She hesitated a few paces from his side.

Grimm's hand shot out and fastened on her wrist. "Jillian, please." His voice was so low, it was almost inaudible.

"Please what?" she whispered.

Swiftly he flicked his wrist and she was standing before him, captured between his thighs. His eyes were fixed in the vicinity of her navel, as if he couldn't summon the strength to raise them. "Kiss me, Jillian. Touch me. Show me I'm alive," he whispered back.

Jillian bit her lip as his words slammed into her heart. The most valiant, intense man she'd ever known was afraid he wasn't fully alive. He raised his head and she cried out softly at his expression. It was dark, his eyes swirling with shadows, memories of times she couldn't even begin to comprehend. She cradled his face between her hands and kissed him, lingering on his lower lip, savoring the sensual curve.

"You're the most incredibly alive man I've ever known."

"Am I, Jillian? Am I?" he asked desperately.

How could he wonder about such a thing? His lips were warm and vital, his hands moved across her skin, awakening nerve endings she'd never suspected existed. "Why did you keep the book, Grimm?"

His hands fastened possessively on her waist. "I kept it to remind me that although there is evil, there is sometimes beauty and light. You, Jillian. You were always my light."

Jillian's heart soared. She'd come seeking confirmation of their fragile intimacy, to prove to herself that the tenderness and physical affection Grimm had offered her the night before had not been an isolated instance. She'd never dreamed that he might offer her words of... love? For what else were words like that if not words of love?

Her dreams were finally being realized. She'd always known there was a bond between herself and her wild-eyed beast-boy, but coming together as man and woman exceeded all her childhood fantasies.

Rising to his feet, Grimm pulled her against the muscled length of his body, unselfconsciously offering her the powerful evidence of his desire. The mere brush of him between her thighs made her shiver breathlessly.

"I can't get enough of you, Jillian," he breathed, fascinated by the sensual widening of her eyes, by the instinctive way her tongue wet the fullness of her lower lip. He captured it and kissed her slowly with scorching, lingering, mind-stealing kisses as he backed her toward the bed. Halfway there, he seemed to change his mind. He cupped her shoulders in his strong hands and turned her in his arms. Jillian had thought the sensation of him pressed against her thighs was too exciting to bear, but now the hard length of him rose hot against her, and she pushed back into him in a wordless plea. His hands began a languid journey over her body. He caressed the soft curve of her hips, slid his palms up the bow of her back, then slipped his arms around her to catch her breasts, finding the sensitive nipples and tugging them gently through the thin fabric of her chemise.

Gathering her hair in his hand, he tenderly tugged it to the side and kissed the exposed nape of her neck. The brief nip of his teeth caused her to arch her back and surge against him.

He edged her forward, guiding her past the bed and toward the wall. Pressing her close to the smooth stones, he twined his fingers between hers with his palms flush to the backs of her hands. He placed her palms against the wall above her head.

"Doona remove your hands from the wall, Jillian. No matter what I do, hold on to the wall and simply feel..."

Jillian held on to the wall as if it were her last hold on sanity. When he slipped her chemise from her body, she shivered as the cool air met her heated skin. His hands brushed the firm underside of her breasts, trailed over her waist, and hesitated on her hips. Then his fingers tightened on her skin and his tongue traced a lingering path down the hollow of her spine. She leaned against the wall, her palms flat, swaying with pleasure. By the time he was done, there was not one inch of her skin he hadn't kissed or caressed with the velvety stroke of his tongue.

Now she understood why he'd told her to hold on to the wall. It had nothing to do with the wall itself and everything to do with preventing her from touching him. Being touched by Grimm Roderick, yet being unable to touch back, overwhelmed her senses and forced her to accept pure pleasure with no distractions.

He dropped to his knees behind her, and he told her—both with his hands and with a low rush of words—how beautiful she was, what she did to him, and how very much he wanted her, *needed* her.

He slid his hands up the insides of her thighs, trailing slow, heated kisses across the round curves of her bottom. A sudden gasp of pleasure escaped her when his hand found the sensitive center between her legs. As his fingers stroked her with an irresistible friction that coaxed a whimper from her throat, he nipped her buttock.

"Grimm!" she gasped.

Laughter laced with something dangerously erotic heightened her arousal even further. "Hands on the wall," he reminded when she started to turn. He eased her thighs apart and maneuvered himself so that he was on the floor, gazing up at her, his face only inches from the part of her that was aching for his touch. She

opened her mouth to protest his being so intimately positioned, when the heat of his tongue silenced any admonishment she may have made. Her neck arched and it took every ounce of her will not to scream from the stunning pleasure he ignited within her.

Then her gaze was drawn down to the magnificent warrior kneeling between her thighs. The vision of his face, intense with passion, coupled with the incredible feelings he was coaxing forth, shortened her breath to tiny, helpless pants. She rocked softly against him, making small, breathless cries unlike any sound she'd ever thought to make before.

"I'm going to fall," she gasped.

"I'll catch you, Jillian."

"But I don't think we should—oh!"

"Don't think," he agreed.

"But my legs... won't... hold!"

He laughed, and with a swift tug yanked her down on top of him. They tumbled onto a woven rug in a press of heated skin and tangled limbs. "And to think you were afraid to fall," he teased.

She savored the incredible closeness of their bodies, and at that moment she fully let go. As she fell against him, she fell even more completely in love with him, into a mindless passion. He *would* always catch her—that she knew without a doubt. They rolled across the rug in a playful skirmish for the superior position, then he flipped her so suddenly that she landed on her hands and knees. In an instant he was behind her, nudging into the cleft between the soft curves of her bottom, and she gasped aloud.

"Now," she cried.

"Now," he agreed, and drove into her.

She felt him deep inside her, filling her, joining them together. Cupping her breasts, he thrust inside her, and she felt so connected to him that it took her breath away. She made a sound of supreme dismay when he slipped out, leaving

an ache deep inside her, and she purred with pleasure when he filled her again so deeply that she arched her back and rose up against him, her shoulders pressing against his hard chest

He must have awakened something inside her, Jillian decided, because it took only a few more thrusts for her body to break free and shatter into a thousand quivering pieces. She would *never* get enough of him.

* * * * *

Hours later, a sated Jillian was lying in a puddle of contentment on his bed. When his hands began their sensual dance upon her body, she sighed. "I couldn't possibly feel that again, Grimm," she protested weakly. "I haven't a muscle left in my body, and I simply couldn't..."

Grimm smiled wickedly. "When I was younger I stayed with Gypsies for a time."

Jillian lay back against the pillow, wondering what this had to do with the earth-shattering explosions he'd been lavishing upon her.

"They had a strange ceremony they practiced to induce 'Vision.' It didn't rely upon a mixture of herbs and spices or the smoking of a pipe. It relied upon sexual excess to achieve a state that transcended the everyday frame of mind. They would place one of their seers in a tent with a dozen women, who repeatedly brought him to climax until he was begging for no more pleasure. The Rom claim climax releases something in the body that causes the spirit to soar, ripping it free from its earthly mooring, opening it to the extraordinary."

"I believe that." Jillian was fascinated. "It makes me feel as if I've drunk too much sweet wine—my head gets swimmy and my body feels weak and strong at the same time." When his fingers found the juncture of her thighs, she shivered. With a few deft movements, he had her tingling, hungering all over again, and when he brought her to a swift release with his hands, it was even more exquisite than the last. "Grimm!" Heat erupted inside her, and she shuddered. He didn't remove his hand, but cupped her gently until she calmed. Then he began again, moving his fingers in a light teasing motion over the sensitive nub.

"And again, my sweet Jillian, until you can no longer look at me without knowing what I can do to you, where I can take you, how many times I can take

you there."

* * * * *

For Grimm there was no rest that night. He paced the stone floor, kicking at the lambskin rugs, wondering how he was going to bring himself to do the right thing this time. Never in his life had he allowed himself to get too attached to anything or anyone, because he'd always known that at any moment he might have to leave, fleeing the hunt the McKane perpetuated against any man suspected of being Berserk.

They'd found him in Durrkesh. Quinn was right. What was to prevent them from coming to Caithness? They could have easily followed the lumbering cart upon which they'd transported the sick men. And if they descended upon Caithness again, what harm would this blessed place suffer? What harm might they do to Jillian's home and Jillian herself? Edmund had died as a result of the last McKane attack. Maybe he'd caught a lung fever, but if he hadn't been wounded to begin with, he would never have caught the disease that had claimed his young life.

Grimm couldn't live with the thought of bringing harm—again—to Caithness and Jillian.

He stopped by the bed, gazed down at her, and watched her with his heart in his eyes. *I love you, Jillian*, he willed to her sleeping form. *Always have, and always will. But I'm Berserk, and you—you're the best of life. I have an insane old da and a crumbling pile of rocks to call home. It's no life for a lady.*

He forced his dark thoughts away, scattering them with his formidable will. Sinking into her body was all he wanted to contemplate. These past two days with Jillian had been the best two days of his life. He should be content with that, he told himself.

She rolled over in her sleep, her hand falling palm open, fingers slightly curled. Her golden hair fanned out across the white pillows, her full breasts spilled above the downy linen. Just one more day, he promised himself, and one more blissful, magical, incredible night. Then he'd leave, before it was too late.



CHAPTER 19

QUINN AND RAMSEY SACKED THE KITCHENS OF CAITHNESS at dawn. Not one piece of fruit, not one slab of meat, not a single savory morsel was spared.

"Christ, I feel like I haven't eaten solid food in weeks!"

"We damn near haven't. Broth and bread don't count as real food." Ramsay tore off a chunk of smoked ham with his teeth. "I haven't had an appetite until now. That damn poison made me so sick, I thought I might never want to eat again!"

Quinn palmed an apple and bit into it with relish. Platters were piled haphazardly atop every available surface. The maids would faint when they discovered the men had wiped out all the food that had been prepared for the coming weekend.

"We'll hunt and replenish." Quinn felt mildly guilty as his gaze swept the decimated larder. "You up to a bit of hunting, Ram, my man?"

"So long as it's wearing a skirt," Ramsay said with a gusty sigh, "and answers to the name of Jillian."

"I don't think so," Quinn replied acerbically. "Perhaps you didn't notice, but Jillian obviously has a bit of a *tendre* for me. If I hadn't gotten sick at Durrkesh, I would have proposed marriage and we would be betrothed by now."

Ramsay took a deep slug of whisky and placed the bottle on the counter with a thump. "You really are dense, aren't you, de Moncreiffe?"

"Don't tell me you think it's you." Quinn rolled his eyes.

"Of course not. It's that bastard Roderick. It always has been, ever since we got here." Ramsay's dark expression was murderous. "And after what happened two nights ago..."

Quinn stiffened. "What happened two nights ago?"

Ramsay took another swallow, swished it over his tongue, and brooded a silent moment. "Did you notice the long table in the hall is gone, Quinn?"

"Now that you mention it, yes, it is. What happened to it?"

"I saw pieces of it out back behind the bothy. It was shattered down the center."

Quinn said nothing. He knew of only one man who could shatter a table of such massive proportions with his bare hands.

"I came down yesterday to find the maids sweeping food off the floor. One of the candelabra was wedged into the wall. Someone had a helluva fight in there two nights ago. But nobody has breathed a word about it, have they?"

"What are you saying, Logan?" Quinn asked grimly.

"Just that the only two people who were well enough to dine in the hall two nights ago were Grimm and Jillian. They obviously fought, but today Grimm didn't seem bitter. And Jillian, why, the woman has been wreathed in smiles and good humor. Matter of fact, just as a little test, what say we go wake Grimm right now and talk to him about it? That is, if he's not otherwise occupied."

"If you're insinuating that Jillian might be in his chambers, you're a stupid bastard and I'll call you out for it," Quinn snapped. "And maybe there was a fight in the hall between them, but I guarantee you that Grimm is far too honorable to seduce Jillian. Besides, he can't even bring himself to say a civil word to her. He certainly couldn't be nice to her long enough to seduce her."

"You don't find it curious that just when it seemed like you were making progress with her, you and I get poisoned and put out of the running, but he doesn't?" Ramsay asked. "I'd say it was suspiciously convenient. I think it's damned odd that he didn't get sick too."

"He didn't consume any of the poison," Quinn defended.

"Maybe that's because he knew what was poisoned in advance," Ramsay argued.

"That's enough, Logan!" Quinn snapped. "It's one thing to accuse him of wanting Jillian. Hell, we all want her. But it's entirely another to accuse him of trying to kill us. You don't know a damn thing about Grimm Roderick."

"Maybe you're the one who doesn't know him," Ramsay countered. "Maybe Grimm Roderick pretends to be something he's not. I, for one, plan to wake him

right now and find out." Ramsay stalked from the room, muttering under his breath.

Quinn shook his head and vaulted after him. "Logan, would you cool your heels —"

"No! You're so convinced of his innocence, I say let's make him prove it!" Ramsay took the stairs to the west wing three at a time, and Quinn had to lope to keep up. As

Logan sped down the long corridor, Quinn overtook him and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, but Ramsay shook it off.

"If you're so convinced he wouldn't do it, what are you afraid of, de Moncreiffe? Let's just go rouse him."

"You're not thinking clearly about this, Ram—" Quinn broke off abruptly as the door to Grimm's chambers eased opened.

When Jillian slipped out into the hallway, his eyes widened incredulously. There was unequivocally no reason for Jillian to be leaving Grimm's chambers in the wee hours of the morning but for the reason Ramsay had suggested. She was his lover.

Quinn instantly ducked back, pulling Ramsay with him into the shadowed alcove of a doorway.

Her hair was disheveled, and she wore only a woolen draped about her shoulders. Although it trailed nearly to the floor, it left little doubt that there was nothing beneath it.

"Odin's balls," he whispered.

Ramsay favored him with a mocking smile as they lurked in the dark alcove. "Not the honorable Grimm Roderick, right, Quinn?" he whispered.

"That son of a bitch." Quinn's gaze lingered on Jillian's sweet curves as she disappeared down the hallway. The early rays of dawn coming in the tall windows colored his eyes with a strangely crimson glint as he stared at Ramsay.

"Some best friend, eh, de Moncreiffe? He knew you wanted her. He doesn't even

offer her marriage. He just takes it for free."

"Over my dead body he will," Quinn vowed.

"Her da brought three men here so she could choose a husband. And what does he do? Both you and I would do the honorable thing, marry her and give her a name, babes, and a life. Roderick tups her and will likely saunter off into the sunset, and you know it. That man has no intention of wedding her. If he possessed one honorable intention, he would have left her to you or me, men who would do right by her. I'm telling you, you don't know him as well as you think."

Quinn scowled, and the minute Jillian disappeared from view, he stalked off muttering beneath his breath.

* * * * *

The day passed in a haze of happiness for Jillian. The only moment it was marred was when she encountered Quinn at breakfast. He was distant and aloof, not his normal self at all. He eyed her strangely, fidgeted over his breakfast, and finally stalked off in silence.

Once or twice she brushed past Ramsay, who was also behaving oddly. Jillian didn't spare much thought for it; they were probably still suffering the aftereffects of the poison and would be fine in time.

The world was a magnificent place, in her opinion. She was even feeling magnanimous toward her da for having brought her true love back to her. In a burst of generosity she decided he was as wise as she'd once thought. She would wed Grimm Roderick and her life would be perfect.

CHAPTER 20

"WELL?" RONIN MCILLIOCH DEMANDED.

Elliott shuffled forward, clutching a sheaf of crisp parchments in his hand.

"Tobie did well, milord, although we couldn't risk moving in too close to Caithness. Your son possesses the same remarkable senses you have. Still, Tobie managed to capture his likeness on several occasions: riding, saving a small boy, and twice with the woman."

"Let me see." Ronin thrust an impatient hand at Elliott. He rifled through the pages one by one, absorbing every detail. "He's a bonny lad, isn't he, Elliott? Look at those shoulders! Tobie dinna exaggerate, did he?" When Elliott shook his head, Ronin smiled. "Look at that power. My son's every inch a legendary warrior. The lasses must swoon over him."

"Aye, he's a legend, your son is. You should have seen him kill the mountain cat. He cut his own hand to bring on the Berserker rage, to save the child."

Ronin passed the sketches to the man at his side. Two pairs of ice-blue eyes studied every line.

"By Odin's spear!" Ronin exhaled slowly as he reached the last two drawings. "She's the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"Your son thinks so," Elliott said smugly. "He's every bit as besotted as you were with Jolyn. She's the one, milord, no doubt about it."

"Have they...?" Ronin trailed off meaningfully.

"Judging by the wreck Gavrael made of the Greathall, I'd say yes." Elliott grinned.

Ronin and the man at his side exchanged pleased glances. "The time is at hand. Get with Gilles and start the preparations for him to be comin' home."

"Yes, milord!"

The man sitting next to Ronin raised ice-blue eyes to the McIlloch's. "Do you

really think it's goin' to happen as the old woman foretold?" Ronin's brother, Balder, asked softly.

"Cataclysmic changes," Ronin murmured. "She said this generation would suffer more greatly than any McIlloch, but promised that so, too, would this generation advance, and know greater happiness. The old seer swore that my son would see sons of his own, and I believe that. She vowed that when he chose his mate, his mate would be bringin' him home to Maldebann."

"And how will you transcend his hatred for you, Ronin?" his brother asked.

"I doona know." Ronin sighed heavily. "Maybe I'm hoping for a miracle, that he'll listen and forgive me. Now that he's found his mate he may be sympathetic to my plight. He may be capable of understandin' why I did what I did. And why I let him go."

"Doona be so hard on yourself, Ronin. The McKane would have followed you to him if you'd gone after him. They were waiting for you to betray his hidin' place. They know you won't breed more sons. They doona know I even exist. It's Gavrael they're determined to destroy, and the time is quickenin'. If they discover he's found his mate, they'll stop at nothin'."

"I know. He was well hidden at Caithness for years, so I thought it best to leave well enough alone. Gibraltar trained him better than I could have at the time." Ronin met Balder's gaze. "But I always thought that at some point he would come home of his own volition; out of curiosity or confusion about what he was if nothing else, and long before now. When he didn't, when he never once looked west to Maldebann... ah, Balder, I fear I grew bitter. I couldna believe he hated me so completely."

"What makes you think he'll be forgivin' you now?"

Ronin raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "A fool's fancy? I must believe. Or else I'd have no reason to go on."

Balder clasped his shoulder affectionately. "You have a reason to go on. The McKane must be defeated once and for all and you must ensure the safety of your son's sons. That in itself is reason enough."

"And it will be done," Ronin vowed.

* * * * *

Grimm spent the day riding, scouring every inch of Caithness for some sign that the McKane had found him. He knew how they operated: They would set up camp on the perimeter of the estate and wait for the right moment, any moment of vulnerability. Grimm rode the entire circumference, searching for anything: the remains of a recent fire, missing livestock commandeered and slaughtered, word of strangers among the crofters.

He found nothing. Not one shred of evidence to support his suspicion that he was being watched.

Still, a prickling of unease lurked at the base of his neck where he always felt it when something was wrong. There was a threat, unidentified and unseen, somewhere at Caithness.

He rode into the bailey at dusk, battling an overwhelming desire to slip from his horse, race into the castle, and rush to Jillian. To sweep her into his embrace, carry her to his chambers, and make love to her until neither of them could move, which for a Berserker was a very long time.

Leave, his conscience pricked. Leave this moment. Doona even pack a satchel, doona even say goodbye, just get out now.

He felt like he was being torn in half. In all the years he'd dreamed of Jillian, he'd never imagined he could feel this way; she completed him. The Berserker had risen in him and been humbled by her presence. She could make him clean again. Merely being with her soothed the beast he'd learned to hate, the beast she didn't even know existed.

He grimaced inwardly as hope, the treacherous emotion he'd never permitted himself to feel, jockeyed for position with his premonition of danger. Hope was a luxury he could ill afford. Hope made men do foolish things, such as staying at Caithness when all his heightened senses were clamoring that despite finding no sign of McKane, he was being watched and a confrontation was imminent. He knew how to handle danger. He didn't know how to handle hope.

Sighing, he entered the Greathall and picked at a platter of fruit near the hearth. Selecting a ripe pear, he dropped into a chair before the fire and brooded into the

flames, battling his urge to seek her out. He had to make some decisions. He had to find a way to behave honorably, to do the right thing, but he no longer knew what the right thing was. Nothing was black and white anymore; there were no easy answers. He knew it was dangerous to remain at Caithness, but he wanted to remain more than anything he'd ever desired in his life.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't hear Ramsay approach until the Highlander's deep, rumbling voice jarred him. That alone should have warned him that he'd allowed his guard to slip dangerously.

"Where've you been, Roderick?"

"Riding."

"All day? Damn it, man, there's a beautiful woman in the castle and you go out riding all day?"

"I had some thinking to do. Riding clears my head."

"I'd say you have some thinking to do," Ramsay muttered beneath his breath.

With his heightened hearing, Grimm heard each syllable. He turned and faced Ramsay levelly. "Just what is it you think I should be thinking about?"

Ramsay looked startled. "I'm standing a dozen paces from you! There's no way you could have heard that. It was scarcely audible."

"Obviously I did," Grimm said coolly. "So what is it you presume to tell me I should be thinking about?"

Ramsay's dark eyes flickered, and Grimm could see he was trying to suppress his volatile temper. "Let's try honor, Roderick," Ramsay said stiffly. "Honoring our host. And his daughter."

Grimm's smile was dangerous. "I'll make you a deal, Logan. If you doona bring up my honor, I won't drag yours out of the pigsty where it's been bedding down for years."

"My honor—" Ramsay began hotly, but Grimm cut him off impatiently. He had more important things to occupy his mind than arguing with Ramsay.

"Let's just get to the point, Logan. How much gold do you owe the Campbell? Half of what Jillian's worth? Or is it more? From what I hear, you're into him so deeply you may as well have put yourself six feet under. If you bag the St. Clair heiress, you'll be able to clear your debts and live in extravagance for a few years. Isn't that right?"

"Not all men are as wealthy as you, Roderick. For some of us, whose people are vast in number, it's a struggle to take care of our clan. And I care for Jillian," Ramsay growled.

"I'm sure you do. The same way you care for seeing your belly filled with the finest food and the best whisky. The same way you care for riding a pure-blooded stallion, the same way you like to show off your wolfhounds. Maybe all those expenses are why you've been having a hard time maintaining your people. How many years did you fritter away at court, spending gold as liberally as your clan procreates?"

Ramsay turned stiffly and was silent a long moment. Grimm watched him, every muscle in his body tensed to spring. Logan had a violent temper—Grimm had experienced it before. He berated himself for antagonizing the man, but Ramsay Logan's tendency to put his own needs above those of his starving clan infuriated him.

Ramsay drew a deep breath and turned around, astonishing Grimm with a pleasant smile. "You're wrong about me, Roderick. I confess, my past isn't so exemplary, but I'm not the same man I used to be."

Grimm watched him, skepticism evident in every line on his face.

"See? I'm not losing my temper." Ramsay raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I can see how you might believe such things of me. I was a wild, self-centered reprobate once. But I'm not any longer. I can't prove it to you. Only time will prove my sincerity. Grant me that much, will you?"

Grimm snorted. "Sure, Logan. I'll grant you that much. You may be different." *Worse*, Grimm added in the privacy of his thoughts. He turned his gaze back to the flames.

As Grimm heard Ramsay turn to leave the room, he was unable to prevent

himself from asking, "Where's Jillian?"

Logan stopped in mid-step and shot a cool glance over his shoulder. "Playing chess with Quinn in the study. He intends to propose marriage to her tonight, so I suggest you give them privacy. Jillian deserves a proper husband, and if she won't have him, I intend to offer in his stead."

Grimm nodded stiffly. After a few moments of attempting to block all thoughts of Jillian from his mind—Jillian ensconced in the cozy study with Quinn, who was proposing marriage—and failing, he stalked back out into the night, more disturbed by Ramsay's words than he wished to admit.

* * * * *

Grimm wandered the gardens for nearly half an hour before he was struck by the realization that he'd seen no sign of his stallion. He'd left him in the inner ward less than an hour ago. Occam rarely wandered far from the castle.

Puzzled, Grimm searched the inner and outer wards, whistling repeatedly, but he heard nary a nicker, no thunder of hooves. He turned his thoughtful gaze to the stables that graced the edge of the outer bailey. Instinct quickened inside him, warning him, and he set off at a run for the outbuilding.

He burst into the stables and drew to an abrupt halt. It was abnormally silent, and an odd odor pervaded the air. Sharp, acrid, like the stench of rotten eggs. Peering into the gloom, he catalogued every detail of the room before stepping in. Hay tumbled in piles across the floor—normal. Oil lamps suspended from the rafters—also normal. All the gates shut—still normal.

Scent of a thing sulfuric—definitely not normal. But not much to go on either.

He stepped gingerly into the stables, whistled, and was rewarded with a muffled neigh from the stall at the farthest end of the stables. Grimm forced himself not to lurch forward.

It was a trap.

While he couldn't fathom the exact nature of the threat, danger fairly dripped from the rafters of the low outbuilding. His senses bristled. What was amiss? Sulfur?

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, paced forward and gently scuffed at the hay beneath his boot, then stooped to push aside a thick sheaf of clover.

He expelled a low whistle of amazement.

He pushed at more hay, moved forward five paces, did the same, moved left five paces, and repeated the motion. Sweeping his hand across the dusty stone floor beneath the hay, he came up with a fistful of finely corned black powder.

Christ! The entire floor of the stable had been evenly sprinkled with a layer of black powder. Someone had liberally doused the stones, then spread loose hay atop it. Black powder was made from a combination of saltpeter, charcoal, and sulfur. Many clans cultivated their own saltpeter in or near the stables to fashion the weapon, but the stuff spread on the floor was fully processed black powder, painstakingly corned to uniform granules, possessing lethal explosive properties, and planted deliberately. It was a far cry from the raw version of fermenting manure from which saltpeter was derived. Coupled with the flammability of the hay and the natural abundance of fresh manure, the stables were an inferno waiting to blow. One spark would send the entire stable up with the force of a massive bomb. If one of the oil lanterns fell or so much as coughed up an oily spark, the building—and half the outer ward—would be rocked by the explosion.

Occam nickered, a sound of frustrated fear. He was muzzled, Grimm realized. Someone had muzzled his horse and penned him in a deadly trap.

He would never permit his horse to be burned again, and whoever had designed this trap knew him well enough to know his weakness for the stallion. Grimm stood, absolutely motionless, ten paces inside the door—not too far to flee for safety if the hay started to smolder. But Occam was in a locked stall, fifty yards from safety, and therein lay the problem.

A coldhearted man would turn his back and leave. What was a horse, after all? A beast, used for man's purposes. Grimm snorted. Occam was a regal, beautiful creature, possessing intelligence and the same capacity to suffer pain and fear as any human being.

No, he could never leave his horse behind.

He had barely completed that thought when something hurtled through the window to his left and the straw caught fire in an instant.

Grimm lunged into the flames.

* * * * *

In the coziness of the study, Jillian laughed as she moved her bishop into a position of checkmate. She stole a surreptitious peek toward the window, as she had a dozen times in the past hour, seeking some sign that Grimm had returned. Ever since she'd glimpsed him riding out this morning, she'd been watching for him. The moment Occam's great gray shape lumbered past the study, Jillian feared she would surge to her feet, giddy as a lass, and be off at a run. Memories of the night she'd spent entangled with Grimm's hard, inexhaustible body brought a flush to her skin, heating her in a way a fire never could.

"Not fair! How can I concentrate? Playing you when you were a wee lass was far easier," Quinn complained. "I can't think when I play you now."

"Ah, the advantages of being a woman," Jillian drawled mischievously. She was certain she must be radiating her newfound sensual knowledge. "Is it my fault your attention wanders?"

Quinn's gaze lingered on her shoulders, bared by the gown she wore.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "Look at you, Jillian. You're beautiful!" His voice dropped to a confidential tone. "Jillian, lass, there's something I wish to discuss with you—"

"Quinn, hush." She placed a finger against his lips and shook her head.

Quinn brushed her hand away. "No, Jillian, I've kept my silence long enough. I know what you feel, Jillian." He paused deliberately to lend emphasis to his next words. "And I know what's going on with Grimm." He held her gaze levelly.

Jillian was immediately wary. "What do you mean?" she evaded.

Quinn smiled in an effort to soften his words. "Jillian, he's not the marrying kind."

Jillian bit her lip and averted her gaze. "You don't know that for certain. That's like saying Ramsay's not the marrying kind because, from the tales I've heard,

he's been a consummate womanizer. But only this morning he convinced me of his troth. Merely because a man has shown no past inclination to wed doesn't mean he won't. People change." Grimm had certainly changed, revealing the tender, loving man she'd always believed he really was.

"Logan asked you to marry him?" Quinn scowled.

Jillian nodded. "This morning. After breakfast he approached me while I was walking in the gardens."

"He offered for you? He knew I planned to do so myself!" Quinn cursed, then mumbled a hasty apology. "Forgive me, Jillian, but it makes me angry that he'd go behind my back like that."

"I didn't accept, Quinn, so it hardly matters."

"How did he take it?"

Jillian sighed. The Highlander hadn't taken it well at all; she had the feeling she'd barely escaped a dangerous display of temper. "I don't think Ramsay Logan is accustomed to being rebuffed. He seemed furious."

Quinn studied her a moment, then said, "Jillian, lass, I wasn't going to tell you this, but I think you should be informed so you can make a wise decision. The Logan are land rich but gold poor. Ramsay Logan needs to marry, and marry well. You would be a godsend to his impoverished clan."

Jillian gave him an astonished look. "Quinn! I can't believe that you would try to discredit my suitors. Heavens! Ramsay spent a quarter hour this morning trying to discredit you and Grimm. What's with you men?"

Quinn stiffened. "I am not trying to discredit your suitors. I'm telling you the truth. Logan needs gold. His clan is starving, and has been for many years. They've scarcely managed to hold on to their own lands lately. In the past, the Logan hired out as mercenaries to get coin, but there've been so few wars in recent years that there is no mercenary work to be found. Land takes coin, and coin is something the Logan have never had. You are the answer to their every prayer. Excuse my crass way of wording it, but if Logan could bag the rich St. Clair bride, his clan would herald him as their savior."

Jillian nibbled her lip thoughtfully. "And you, Quinn de Moncreiffe, why do you wish to wed me?"

"Because I care deeply for you, lass," Quinn said simply.

"Perhaps I should ask Grimm about *you*."

Quinn closed his eyes and sighed.

"Just what's wrong with Grimm as a candidate?" she pressed, determined to have it all out.

Quinn's gaze was compassionate. "I don't mean to be cruel, but he will never marry you, Jillian. Everyone knows that Grimm Roderick has vowed never to wed."

Jillian refused to let Quinn see how his words affected her. She bit her lip to prevent any rash words from escaping. She had nearly worked up the courage to ask him why, and if Grimm had actually said such a thing recently, when a tremendous explosion rocked the castle.

The windows rattled in their frames, the very castle shuddered, and both Jillian and Quinn leapt to their feet.

"What was that?" she gasped.

Quinn flew to the window and peered out. "Christ!" he shouted. "The stables are on fire!"

CHAPTER 21

JILLIAN RACED INTO THE COURTYARD AFTER QUINN, crying Grimm's name over and over, heedless of the curious eyes of the staff and the shocked gazes of Kaley and Hatchard. The explosion had roused the castle. Hatchard was standing in the courtyard shouting orders, organizing an attack against the hostile flames that were devouring the stables and moving east to ravage the castle.

The autumn weather had been dry enough that the fire would quickly rage out of control, gobbling buildings and crops. The teeming village of daub-and-wattle huts would ignite like dry grass if the flames encroached that far. A few stray sparks carried on the breeze could destroy the whole valley. Jillian frantically pushed that concern to the perimeter of her thoughts; she had to find Grimm.

"Where's Grimm? Has anyone seen Grimm?" Jillian pushed through the throng of people, peering into faces, desperate to catch a glimpse of his proud stance, his intense blue eyes. Her eyes were peeled for the shape of a great, gray stallion. "Don't be a hero, don't be a hero," she muttered under her breath. "For once, just be a man, Grimm Roderick. Be *safe*"

She didn't realize she'd said the words aloud until Quinn, who'd surfaced in the throng beside her, looked at her sharply and shook his head. "Och, lass, you love him, don't you?"

Jillian nodded as tears filled her eyes. "Find him, Quinn! Make him be safe!"

Quinn sighed and nodded. "Stay here, lass. I'll find him for you. I promise."

The eerie scream of a trapped horse split the air, and Jillian pivoted toward the stables, chilled by a sudden, terrible knowledge. "He couldn't be in there, could he, Quinn?"

Quinn's expression plainly echoed her fear. But of course he could, and would. Grimm could not stand by and watch a horse be burned. She knew that; he'd said as much that day at Durrkesh. In his mind, the innocent cry of an animal was as intolerable as the cry of wounded child or a frightened woman.

"No man could survive that." Jillian eyed the inferno. Flames shot up, tall as the

castle, brilliant orange against the black sky. The wall of fire was so intense that it was nearly impossible to look at. Jillian narrowed her eyes in a desperate bid to make out the low rectangular shape of the stable, to no avail. She could see nothing but fire.

"You're right, Jillian," Quinn said slowly. "No *man* could."

As if in a dream, she saw a shape coalesce within the flames. Like some nightmare vision the white-orange flames shimmered, a blurred form of darkness rippled behind them, and a rider burst forth, wreathed in flames, streaking straight for the loch, where both horse and rider plunged into the cool waters, hissing as they submerged. She held her breath until horse and rider surfaced.

Quinn spared her a quick nod of reassurance before racing off to join the fight against the inferno that threatened Caithness.

Jillian darted for the loch, tripping over her feet in her haste to reach his side. As Grimm rose from the water and led Occam up the rocky bank, she flung herself at him, burrowed into his arms, and buried her face against his sodden chest. He held her for a long moment until she stopped shuddering, then drew back, wiping gently at her tears. "Jillian," he said sadly.

"Grimm, I thought I'd lost you!" She pressed frantic kisses to his face while she searched his body with her hands to assure herself he was unharmed. "Why, you're not even burned," she said, puzzled. Although his clothing hung in charred tatters and his skin was a bit pinkened, there wasn't so much as a blister marring his smooth skin. She peered past him at Occam, who also seemed to have been spared. "How can this be?" she wondered.

"His coat has been singed, but overall he's fine. We rode fast," Grimm said quickly.

"I thought I'd lost you," Jillian repeated. Gazing into his eyes, she was struck by the sudden and terrible understanding that although he'd burst from the flames, miraculously whole, her words had never been truer. She *had* lost him. She had no idea how or why, but his glittering gaze was teeming with distance and sorrow. With goodbye.

"No," she shouted. "No. I won't let you go. You are *not* leaving me!"

Grimm dropped his gaze to the ground.

"No," she insisted. "Look at me."

His gaze was dark. "I have to go, lass. I will not bring destruction to this place again."

"What makes you think this fire is about you?" she demanded, battling her every instinct that told her the fire had indeed been about him. She didn't know why, but she knew it was true. "Oh! You are so arrogant," she pressed on bravely, determined to convince him that the truth was not the truth. She would use every weapon, fair or unfair, to keep him.

"Jillian." He blew out a breath of frustration and reached for her.

She beat at him with her fists. "No! Don't touch me, don't hold me, not if it means you're going to say goodbye!"

"I must, lass. I've tried to tell you—Christ, I tried to tell myself! I have nothing to offer you. You doona understand; it can never be. No matter how much I might wish to, I can't offer you the kind of life you deserve. Things like this fire happen to me all the time, Jillian. It's not safe for anyone to be around me. They hunt me!"

"Who hunts you?" she wailed as her world crumbled around her.

He made an angry gesture. "I can't explain, lass. You'll simply have to take my word on this. I'm not a normal man. Could a normal man have survived that?" He flung his arm toward the blaze.

"Then what are you?" she shouted. "Why don't you just tell me?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes. After a long pause, he opened them. His eyes were burning, incandescent, and Jillian gasped as a fleeting memory surfaced. It was the memory of a fifteen-year-old who'd watched this man battle the McKane. Watching as he'd seemed to grow larger, broader, stronger with every drop of blood that was shed. Watching his eyes burn like banked coals, listening to his chilling laughter, wondering how any man could slay so many yet remain unharmed.

"What *are* you?" she repeated in a whisper, begging him for comfort. Begging him to be nothing more than a man.

"The warrior who has always—" He closed his eyes. *Loved you*. But he couldn't offer her those words, because he couldn't follow up on what they promised.

"Adored you, Jillian St. Clair. A man who isn't quite a man, who knows he can never have you." He drew a shuddering breath. "You must marry Quinn. Marry him and free me. Doona marry Ramsay—he's not good enough for you. But you must let me go, because I cannot suffer your death on my hands, and that's all that could ever come of you and me being together." He met her gaze, wordlessly beseeching her not to make his leaving any harder than it already was.

Jillian stiffened. If the man was going to leave her, she was going to make certain it hurt like hell. She narrowed her eyes, shooting him a wordless challenge to be brave, to fight for their love. He averted his face.

"Thank you for these days and nights, lass. Thank you for giving me the best memories of my life. But say goodbye, Jillian. Let me go. Take the splendor and wonder that we've shared and let me go."

Her tears started then. He had already made up his mind, had already begun putting distance between them. "Just tell me, Grimm," she begged. "It can't be so bad. Whatever it is, we can deal with it together."

"I'm an animal, Jillian. You doona know me!"

"I know you're the most honorable man I've ever met! I don't care what our life would be like. I would live *any* kind of life, so long as I lived it with you," she hissed.

As Grimm backed away slowly, she watched the life disappear from his eyes, leaving his gaze wintry and hollow. She felt the moment she lost him; something inside her emptied completely, leaving a void she suspected she might die from.

"No!"

He backed away. Occam followed, nickering gently.

"You said you adored me! If you truly cared for me, you would fight to stay by my side!"

He winced. "I care about you too much to hurt you."

"That's weak! You don't know what caring is," she shouted furiously. "Caring is love. And love fights! Love doesn't look for the path of least resistance. Hell's bells, Roderick, if love was that easy everyone would have it. You're a coward!"

He flinched, and a muscle jumped furiously in his jaw. "I am doing the honorable thing."

"To *hell* with the honorable thing," she shouted. "Love has no pride. Love looks for ways to endure."

"Jillian, stop. You want more from me than I'm capable of."

Her gaze turned icy. "Obviously. I thought you were heroic in every way. But you're not. You're just a man after all." She cast her gaze away and held her breath, wondering if she'd goaded him far enough.

"Goodbye, Jillian."

He leapt on his horse, and they seemed to melt into one beast—a creature of shadows disappearing into the night.

She gaped in disbelief at the hole he'd left in her world. He'd left her. He'd really left her. A sob welled up within her, so painful that she doubled over. "You coward," she whispered.

CHAPTER 22

RONIN INSERTED THE KEY INTO THE LOCK, HESITATED, then squared his shoulders firmly. He eyed the towering oak door that was banded with steel. It soared over his head, set in a lofty arch of stone. *Deo non fortuna* was chiseled in flowing script above the arch—"By God, not by chance." For years Ronin had denied those words, refused to come to this place, believing God had forsaken him. *Deo non fortuna* was the motto his clan had lived by, believing their special gifts were God-given and had purpose. Then his "gift" had resulted in Jolyn's death.

Ronin expelled an anxious breath, forcing himself to turn the key and push open the door. Rusty hinges shrieked the protest of long disuse. Cobwebs danced in the doorway and the musty scent of forgotten legends greeted him. *Welcome to the Hall of Lords*, the legends clamored. *Did you really think you could forget us?*

One thousand years of McIlloch graced the hall. Carved deep into the belly of the mountain, the chamber soared to a towering fifty feet. The curved walls met in a royal arch and the ceilings were painted with graphic depictions of the epic heroes of their clan.

His own da had brought him here when he'd turned sixteen. He'd explained their noble history and guided Ronin through the change—guidance Ronin had been unable to provide his own son.

But who would have thought Gavrael would change so much sooner than any of them had? It had been totally unexpected. The battle with the McKane following so quickly on the heels of Jolyn's savage murder had left Ronin too exhausted, too numbed by grief to reach out to his son. Although Berserkers were difficult to kill, if one was wounded badly enough it took time to heal. It had taken Ronin months to recover. The day the McKane had murdered Jolyn they'd left a shell of a man who hadn't wanted to heal.

Immersed in his grief, he'd failed his son. He'd been unable to introduce Gavrael to the life of a Berserker, to train him in the secret ways of controlling the bloodlust. He hadn't been there to explain. He'd failed, and his son had run off to find a new family and a new life.

As the passing years had weathered Ronin's body he'd greeted each weary bone, each aching joint, and each newly discovered silver hair with gratitude, because it carried him one day closer to his beloved Jolyn.

But he couldn't go to Jolyn yet. There were things yet undone. His son was coming home, and he would not fail him this time.

With effort, Ronin forced his attention away from his deep guilt and back to the Hall of Lords. He hadn't even managed to cross the threshold. He squared his shoulders.

Clutching a brightly burning torch, Ronin pushed his way through the cobwebs and into the hall. His footsteps echoed like small explosions in the vast stone chamber. He skirted a few pieces of moldy, forgotten furniture and followed the wall to the first portrait that had been etched in stone over one thousand years ago. The oldest likenesses were stone, painted with faded mixtures of herbs and clays. The more recent portraits were charcoal sketches and paintings.

The women in the portraits shared one striking characteristic. They were all breathtakingly radiant, positively brimming with happiness. The men shared a single distinction as well. All nine hundred and fifty-eight males in this hall had eyes of blue ice.

Ronin moved to the portrait of his wife and raised the torch. He smiled. Had some pagan deity offered him a bargain and said, "I will take away all the tragedy you have suffered in your life, I will take you back in time and give you dozens of sons and perfect peace, but you can never have Jolyn," Ronin McIlloch would have scoffed. He would willingly embrace every bit of tragedy he'd endured to have loved Jolyn, even for the painfully brief time they'd been allotted.

"I won't fail him this time, Jolyn. I swear to you, I will see Castle Maldebann secured and filled with promise again. Then we'll be together to smile down upon this place." After a long pause, he whispered fiercely, "I miss you, woman."

Outside the Hall of Lords, an astonished Gilles entered the connecting hallway and paused, eyeing the open door in disbelief. Rushing down the corridor, he burst into the long-sealed hall, barely suppressing a whoop of delight at the sight

of Ronin, no longer stooped but standing proudly erect beneath a portrait of his wife and son. Ronin didn't turn, but Gilles hadn't expected him to; Ronin always knew who was in his immediate circumference.

"Have the maids set to cleaning, Gilles," Ronin commanded without taking his eyes off the portrait of his smiling wife. "Open this place up and air it out. I want the entire castle scrubbed as it hasna been since my Jolyn was alive. I want this place sparklin'." Ronin opened his arms expansively. "Light the torches and henceforth keep them burnin' in here as they did years ago, day and night. My son is coming home," he finished proudly.

"Yes, milord!" Gilles exclaimed as he hastened off to obey a command he'd been waiting a lifetime to hear.

* * * * *

Where to now, Grimm Roderick? he wondered wearily. Back to Dalkeith to see if he might lure destruction to those blessed shores?

His hands fisted and he longed for a bottomless bottle of whisky, although he knew it wouldn't grant him the oblivion he sought. If a Berserker drank quickly enough, he might feel drunk for the sum total of about three seconds. That wouldn't work at all.

The McKane always found him eventually. He knew now that they must have had a spy in Durrkesh. Likely someone had seen the rage come over him in the courtyard of the tavern, then tried to poison him. The McKane had learned over the years to attack stealthily. Cunning traps or sheer numbers were the only possible ways to take a Berserker, and neither of them was foolproof. Now that he had escaped the McKane twice, he knew the next time they struck they would descend in force.

First they'd tried poison, then the fire at the stables.

Grimm knew if he had remained at Caithness they might have destroyed the entire castle, taking out all the St. Clair in their blind quest to kill him. He'd become acquainted with their unique fanaticism at an early age, and it was a lesson he'd never forgotten.

They'd blessedly lost track of him during the years he'd been in Edinburgh. The

McKane were fighters, not royal arse-kissers, and they devoted little attention to the events at court. He'd hidden in plain sight. Then, when he'd moved from court to Dalkeith, he'd encountered few new people, and those he had met were abjectly loyal to Hawk. He'd started to relax his guard and begun to feel almost... normal.

What an intriguing, tantalizing word: normal. "Take it away, Odin. I was wrong," Grimm whispered. "I doona wish to be Berserk any longer."

But Odin didn't seem to care.

Grimm had to face the facts. Now that the McKane had found him again, they would tear the country apart looking for him. It wasn't safe for him to be near other people. It was time for a new name, perhaps a new country. His thoughts turned to England, but every ounce of Scot in him rebelled.

How could he live without ever touching Jillian again? Having experienced such joy, how could he resume his barren existence? Christ, it would have been better if he'd never known what his life might have been like! On that fateful night above Tuluth, at the foolish age of fourteen, he'd called a Berserker, begging for the gift of vengeance, never realizing how complete that vengeance would be. Vengeance didn't bring back the dead, it deadened the avenger.

But there was really little point in regret, he mocked himself, for he owned the beast and the beast owned him, and it was that simple. Resignation blanketed him, and only one issue remained. *Where to now, Grimm Roderick?*

He nudged Occam to the only place left to go: in the forbidding Highlands he could disappear into the wilderness. He knew every empty hut and cave, every source of shelter from the bitter winter that would soon ice white caps around the mountains.

He would be so cold again.

Guiding Occam with his knees, he plaited war braids into his hair and wondered if an invincible Berserker could die from something so innocuous as a broken heart.

* * * * *

Jillian gazed sadly at the blackened lawn of Caithness. Everything was a

reminder. It was November, and the hated lawn would be black until the first snowfall came to smother it. She couldn't step outside the castle without being forced to remember that night, the fire, Grimm leaving. The lawn sloped and rolled in a vast, never-ending carpet of black ash. All her flowers were gone. Grimm was gone.

He'd abandoned her because he was a coward.

She'd tried to make excuses for him, but there were none to be made. The most courageous man she'd ever known was afraid to love. *Well, to hell with him!* she thought defiantly.

She felt pain; she wouldn't deny it. The mere thought of living without him for the rest of her life was unbearable, but she refused to dwell on it. That would be the sure path to emotional collapse. So she stoked her anger against him, clutching it like a shield to her wounded heart.

"He's not coming back, lass," Ramsay said gently.

Jillian clenched her jaw and spun to face him. "I think I've figured that out, Ramsay," she said evenly.

Ramsay studied her in stalwart stance. When she moved to leave, his hand shot out and wrapped around her wrist. She tried to snatch it away, but he was too strong. "Marry me, Jillian. I swear to you, I'll treat you like a queen. I will never abandon you."

Not so long as there's coin in keeping me, she thought. "Let go of me," she hissed.

He didn't budge. "Jillian, consider your situation. Your parents will be back any day now and expect you to wed. They'll likely force you to choose when they return. I would be good to you," he promised.

"I will never wed," she said with absolute conviction.

His demeanor altered instantly. When his sneering gaze slid over her abdomen, she was shocked; when he spoke, she was rendered momentarily speechless.

"If a bastard quickens in your belly you may think differently, lass," he said with

a smirk. "Then your parents will force you to wed, and you'll be counting your blessings if any decent man will have you. There's a name for women like you. You're not so pure," he spat.

"How dare you!" she cried. The instinct to slap the smirk from his face was overwhelming, and she acted upon it reflexively.

Ramsay's face whitened with rage, and the red welt from her blow stood out in stark relief. He caught her other wrist and pulled her close, bristling with anger. "You'll regret that one day, lass." He shoved her away so savagely, she stumbled. For an instant she saw something so brutal in his eyes that she feared he might force her to the ground and beat her, or worse. She scrambled to her feet and dashed for the castle on trembling legs.

* * * * *

"He's not coming back, Jillian," Kaley said gently.

"I know that! For God's sake, could everyone please just quit saying that to me? Do I look dense? Is that it?"

Kaley eyes filled with tears, and Jillian was instantly remorseful. "Oh, Kaley, I didn't mean to yell at you. I haven't been myself lately. It's just that I'm worried about... things..."

"Things like babies?" Kaley said carefully.

Jillian stiffened.

"Is it possible..." Kaley trailed off.

Jillian averted her gaze guiltily.

"Oh, lass." Kaley wrapped her in her ample embrace. "Oh, lass," she echoed helplessly.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Gibraltar and Elizabeth St. Clair returned.

Jillian was torn by mixed emotions. She was elated to have them home, yet she dreaded seeing them, so she hid in her chambers and waited for them to come to her. And they did, but not until the next morning. In retrospect, she realized she'd

been a fool to give her clever da any time to ferret out information before confronting her.

When the summons finally came, she shivered, and the last vestige of excitement at seeing her parents turned to pure dread. She dragged her feet all the way to the study.

* * * * *

"Mama! Da!" Jillian exclaimed. She vaulted into their arms, greedily snatching hugs before they could launch the interrogation she knew was coming.

"Jillian." Gibraltar terminated the hug so quickly, Jillian knew she was in dire straits indeed.

"How's Hugh? And my new nephew?" she asked brightly.

Gibraltar and Elizabeth exchanged glances, then Elizabeth sank into a chair near the fire, abandoning Jillian to deal with Gibraltar by herself.

"Have you chosen a husband yet, Jillian?" Gibraltar skirted all niceties.

Jillian drew a deep breath. "That's what I wished to speak with you about, Da. I've had a lot of time to think." She swallowed nervously as Gibraltar eyed her dispassionately. Dispassionate never boded well for her—it meant her da was furious. She cleared her throat anxiously. "I have decided, after much consideration, I mean, I've really thought this through... that I... um—" Jillian broke off. She had to stop warbling like an idiot—her da would never be swayed by tepid protests. "Da... I really don't plan to wed. *Ever*." There, it was out. "I mean, I appreciate everything you and Mama have done for me, never think I don't, but marriage is just not for me." She punctuated her words with a confident nod.

Gibraltar regarded her with an unnerving mixture of amusement and condescension. "Nice try, Jillian. But I'm not playing games anymore. I brought three men here for you. Only two are left, and you will marry one of them. I've had it with your shenanigans. You're going to be twenty-two in a month, and either de Moncreiffe or Logan will make a perfectly good husband. There will be no more moping about and no crafty little ploys. *Which one will you wed?*" he demanded, a bit more forcefully than he'd intended.

"Gibraltar!" Elizabeth protested. She rose from her chair, ruffled by his high-handed tone.

"Stay out of this, Elizabeth. She's played me for a fool for the last time. Jillian will summon up one reason after another why she can't wed until we're both too old to do anything about it."

"Gibraltar, we will *not* force her to wed someone she doesn't want." Elizabeth stamped a dainty foot to punctuate her decree.

"She's going to have to accept the fact that she can't have the man she wants, Elizabeth. He was here and he left. And that's the end of the matter." Gibraltar sighed, eyeing his daughter's rigid back as she stood plucking at the folds of her gown. "Elizabeth, I tried. Don't you think I tried? I knew how Jillian felt about Grimm. But I won't force the man to wed her, and even if I did, what good would that do? Jillian doesn't want a forced husband."

"You knew I loved him?" Jillian exclaimed. She almost ran to him, but caught herself and stiffened further.

Gibraltar almost laughed; a broom handle couldn't have been more rigid than his daughter's spine. Stubborn just like her mother. "Of course, lass. I've seen it in your eyes for years. So I brought him here for you. And now Kaley tells me that he left a sennight ago and told you to marry Quinn. Jillian, he's gone. He's made his feelings clear." Gibraltar drew himself up. "I am not going to fling my daughter at some inconsiderate bastard who's too much a fool to see what kind of treasure he'd be getting. I will not gift my Jillian to a man who can't appreciate how rare a woman she is. What kind of father would I be to chase a man down and throw my daughter after him?"

Elizabeth sniffed, blinking back a tear. "You brought him because you knew she loved him," she cooed. "Oh, Gibraltar! Even though I didn't think he was right for her, you saw through it all. You knew what Jillian wanted."

Gibraltar's pleasure at his wife's adoration quickly evaporated when Jillian's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I never knew you knew how I felt, Da," Jillian said in a small voice.

"Of course I did. Just as I know how you feel now. But you have to face the

facts. He left, Jillian—"

"I know he left! *Must* you all keep reminding me?"

"Yes, if you persist in trying to fritter your life away. I gave him the chance, and he was too much a fool to take it. You must move on with your life, lass."

"He didn't think he was good enough for me," Jillian murmured.

"Is that what he said?" Elizabeth asked quickly.

Jillian blew a tendril of hair from her face. "Sort of. He said that I couldn't possibly understand what would happen if he married me. And he's right. Whatever terrible thing he thinks it is, I can't even begin to guess. He acts like there's some dreadful secret about him, and Mama, I can't convince him otherwise. I can't even begin to imagine what horrible thing he thinks is wrong with him. Grimm Roderick is the best man I've ever known, except for you, Da." Jillian smiled weakly at her father before crossing to the window to stare out at the blackened lawn.

Gibraltar's eyes narrowed and he gazed thoughtfully at Elizabeth, who had raised her eyebrows in surprise.

She still doesn't know. Tell her, Elizabeth mouthed, shooting a glance at her daughter's stiff back.

That he's a Berserker? Gibraltar mouthed back, disbelieving. *He must tell her himself.*

He can't. He's not here!

He refuses. And I won't fix it for him. If he can't bring himself to trust her, she shouldn't marry him. He's obviously not man enough for my Jillian.

Our Jillian.

He shrugged. Crossing the study, he cupped Jillian's shoulders with comforting hands. "I'm sorry, Jillian. I truly am. I thought maybe he'd changed over the years. But he hasn't. Still, it doesn't alter that fact that you must wed. I'd like it to be Quinn."

She stiffened and hissed softly. "I am not marrying anyone."

"Yes, you are," Gibraltar enunciated sternly. "I am posting the banns tomorrow, and in three weeks' time you are going to marry *someone*."

Jillian whirled around to face him, her eyes flashing. "You should know I became his lover."

Elizabeth fanned herself furiously.

Gibraltar shrugged.

Elizabeth gaped, first at Jillian, then at her unresponsive husband.

"That's all? A shrug?" Jillian blinked at her father disbelievingly. "Well, while you may not care, I hardly think my husband-to-be would cheerily accept it, do you, Da?"

"I wouldn't mind," Quinn said quietly, startling them all with his unannounced presence. "I'd marry you on any terms, Jillian."

All eyes flew to Quinn de Moncreiffe, whose broad golden frame filled the doorway.

"Good man," Gibraltar said firmly.

"Oh, Quinn!" Jillian said sadly. "You deserve better..."

"I've told you as much before, lass. I'll take you on any terms. Grimm's a fool, but I'm not. I'll marry you happily. No regrets. I've never understood why a woman's supposed to be untouched when a man's expected to be as touched as possible."

"Then it's settled," Gibraltar concluded quickly.

"No, it's not!"

"Yes, it is, Jillian," Gibraltar said sternly. "You will marry in three weeks. Period. End of conversation." He turned away.

"You can't do this to me!"

"Wait." Ramsay Logan stepped into the doorway behind Quinn. "I'd like to offer for her too."

Gibraltar assessed the two men in the doorway and slowly turned his regard to his daughter, who stood, mouth ajar.

"You have twelve hours to choose, Jillian. I post the banns at dawn."

"Mama, you can't let him do this!" Jillian wailed.

Elizabeth St. Clair drew herself erect and sniffed before following Gibraltar from the study.

* * * * *

"What on earth do you think you're doing now, Gibraltar?" Elizabeth demanded.

Gibraltar leaned back, resting on the sill of the window in their bedroom, the hair on his chest glinting gold between the folds of his silk robe in the soft glow of the firelight.

Elizabeth reclined on the bed nude and, Gibraltar marveled, breathtaking. "By Odin's spear, woman, you know I can refuse you nothing when I see you like that."

"Then don't make Jillian wed, love," Elizabeth said simply. There were no games between her and her husband, and there never had been. Elizabeth firmly believed most problems in a relationship could be cleared up or avoided entirely by clear, concise communication. Games invited unnecessary discord.

"I don't plan to," Gibraltar replied with a faint smile. "It will never go that far."

"Whatever do you mean?" Elizabeth removed the pins from her hair, allowing it to cascade in golden waves over her bare breasts. "Is this another one of your infamous plans, Gibraltar?" she asked with lazy amusement.

"Yes." He sank to the edge of the bed beside her. He ran his hand down the smooth shape of her side, contouring the lovely indentation of her waist, soaring over the lush curve of her hip. "If she hadn't admitted that she'd become his lover, I might not have felt so confident. But he's a Berserker, Elizabeth. There is only one true mate for each Berserker, and they know it. He cannot allow the

wedding to take place. A Berserker would die first."

Elizabeth's eyes brightened, and understanding penetrated her sensual languor. "You're posting the banns to antagonize him. Because it's the most effective way to force him to declare himself."

"As always, we understand each other perfectly, don't we, my dear? What better way to bring him back at a run?"

"How clever. I hadn't thought of that. There's no way a Berserker would allow his mate to wed another."

"Let's just hope all the legends about those warriors are true, Elizabeth. Gavrael's da told me years ago that once a Berserker makes love with his own true mate, he can no longer mate another woman. Gavrael is even more Berserk than his da. He'll come for her, and when he does, he'll have no choice but to tell her the truth. We'll get our wedding in three weeks, no doubt about it, and it will be to the man she wants—Grimm."

"What about Quinn's feelings?"

"Quinn doesn't really believe she'll marry him. He is also of the opinion that Grimm will come. I spoke with Quinn before I made Jillian choose, and he agreed to do this. Although I must admit, Ramsay certainly surprised me with his offer."

"You mean you had this all planned out before you confronted her?" Elizabeth was amazed once again by the twists and turns of her husband's brilliant scheming mind.

"It was one of several possible plans," Gibraltar corrected. "A man must anticipate every possibility when the women he loves are concerned."

"My hero." Elizabeth fluttered her eyelashes.

Gibraltar covered her body with his. "I'll show you a hero," he growled.

* * * * *

Gibraltar hadn't thought that even his cosseted Jillian could pout, sulk, and be nasty for three solid weeks.

She could.

Ever since the morning she'd slipped a note bearing one word, "Quinn," under her parents' bedroom door, she'd refused to speak to him in anything but single-word replies. Everyone else in the castle she harangued with the same questions: how many banns had been posted, when, and where.

"Were they posted in Durrkesh, Kaley?" Jillian fretted.

"Yes, Jillian."

"What about Scurrington and Edinburgh?"

"Yes, Jillian." Hatchard sighed, knowing it was futile to remind her he'd answered the same question the day before.

"And the smaller villages in the Highlands? When were they posted there?"

"Days ago, Jillian." Gibraltar interrupted her interrogation.

Jillian sniffed and turned her back on her da.

"Why do you care where the banns have been posted?" Gibraltar provoked.

"Just curious," Jillian said lightly as she strode regally from the room.

* * * * *

"He'll come, Mama. I know he will."

Elizabeth smiled and smoothed Jillian's hair, but weeks passed and Grimm didn't come.

Even Quinn started to get a little nervous.

* * * * *

"What will we do if he doesn't show?" Quinn asked. He paced the study, moving his long legs silently. The wedding was tomorrow and no one had heard a word from Grimm Roderick.

Gibraltar poured them both a drink. "He has to come." Quinn picked up the goblet and sipped thoughtfully.

"He must know the wedding is tomorrow. The only way he could possibly not know is if he is no longer in Scotland. We posted those blasted banns in every village of over fivescore inhabitants."

Gibraltar and Quinn stared at the fire and drank for a time in silence.

"If he doesn't come, I'll go through with it."

"Now, why would you be doing that, lad?" Gibraltar asked gently.

Quinn shrugged. "I love her. I always have."

Gibraltar shook his head. "There's love and then there's *love*, Quinn. And if you're not ready to kill Grimm simply for touching Jillian, then it's not the marrying kind of love you're feeling. She's not for you."

When Quinn made no reply, Gibraltar laughed aloud and slapped him on the thigh. "Oh, she's *definitely* not for you. You didn't even argue with me."

"Grimm said something very similar. He asked me if I *really* loved her—if she made me crazy inside."

Gibraltar smiled knowingly. "That's because she *does* make him crazy inside."

"I want her to be happy, Gibraltar," Quinn said fervently. "Jillian is special. She's generous and beautiful and so... och, so damned in love with *Grimm*!"

Gibraltar raised his goblet to Quinn's and smiled. "That she is. If push comes to shove, I'll stop the ceremony and give her a choice. But I won't let her marry you without giving her that choice." As he drank, he regarded Quinn thoughtfully.

"Actually, I'm not sure I'd let her marry you even then."

"You wound me," Quinn protested.

"She's my baby girl, Quinn. I want love for her. Real love. The kind that makes a man crazy inside."

* * * * *

Jillian curled into a ball on the window ledge of the drum tower and stared, unseeing, into the night. Thousands of stars dimpled the sky, but she saw none of them. Staring into the night was like staring into a great vacuum—her future

without Grimm.

How could she wed Quinn?

How could she refuse? Grimm obviously wasn't coming.

The banns had been posted throughout the country. There was absolutely no way he could *not* know that tomorrow Jillian St. Clair was going to wed Quinn de Moncreiffe. The whole blasted country knew it.

Three weeks ago she might have run away.

But not tonight, not three weeks late for her monthly flow, not with no word from Grimm. Not after believing in him and being proven a lovesick fool.

Jillian rested her palm on her stomach. It was possible she was pregnant, but she wasn't absolutely certain. Her monthly flow had often been irregular and she had been later than this in the past. Mama had told her that many things besides pregnancy could affect a woman's courses: emotional turmoil... or a woman's own devout wish that she was pregnant.

Was that it? Did she so long to be pregnant with Grimm Roderick's child that she'd fooled herself? Or was there truly a baby growing inside her? How she wished she knew for certain. She drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly. Only time would tell.

She'd considered striking out on her own, tracking him down, and fighting for their love, but a defiant shred of pride coupled with good common sense made her refuse. Grimm was in the thick of a battle with himself, and it was a battle *he* had to win or lose. She'd offered her love, told him she would accept any kind of life as long as they lived it together. A woman shouldn't have to fight the man she loved for his love. He had to choose to give it freely, to learn that love was the one thing in this world that *wasn't* frightening.

He was an intelligent man and a brave one. He would come.

Jillian sighed. God forgive her, but she still believed.

He *would* come.

CHAPTER 23

HE DIDN'T COME.

The day of her wedding dawned cloudy and cold. Sleet started falling at dawn, coating the charred lawn with a layer of crunchy black ice.

Jillian stayed in bed, listening to the sounds of the castle preparing for the wedding feast. Her stomach rumbled a welcome to the scents of roasting ham and pheasant. It was a feast to wake the dead, and it worked; she stumbled from the bed and groped her way through the dimly lit room to the mirror. She stared at her reflection. Dark shadows marred the delicate skin where her cheekbones met her tilted amber eyes.

She would marry Quinn de Moncreiffe in less than six hours.

The rumble of voices carried clearly into her chambers; half the county was in residence, and had been since yesterday. Four hundred guests had been invited and five hundred had arrived, crowding the massive castle and spilling over into less accommodating lodgings in the nearby village.

Five hundred people, more than she would ever have at her funeral, tramping around the frozen black lawn.

Jillian squeezed her eyes tightly shut and refused to cry, certain she'd weep blood if she allowed even one more tear to fall.

* * * * *

At eleven o'clock Elizabeth St. Clair dabbed prettily at her tears with a dainty hanky. "You look lovely, Jillian," she said with a heartfelt sigh. "Even more so than I did."

"You don't think the bags under my eyes detract, Mama?" Jillian asked acerbically. "How about the grim set of my mouth? My shoulders droop and my nose is beet red from crying. You don't think anyone will find my appearance a bit suspect?"

Elizabeth sniffed, plunked a headpiece on Jillian's hair, and tugged a thin fall of sheer blue gossamer over her daughter's face. "Your da thinks of everything," she

said with a shrug.

"A veil? Really, Mama. No one wears a veil in these modern times."

"Just think of it, you'll start a new fashion. By the end of the year, everyone will be wearing them again," Elizabeth chirped.

"How can he do this to me, Mama? Knowing the kind of love you and he share, how can he justify condemning me to a loveless marriage?"

"Quinn does love you, so it won't be loveless."

"It will be on my part."

Elizabeth perched on the edge of the bed. She studied the floor a moment, then raised her eyes to Jillian's.

"You do care," Jillian said, somewhat mollified by the sympathy in Elizabeth's gaze.

"Of course I care, Jillian. I'm your mother." Elizabeth regarded her a pensive moment. "Darling, don't fret, your da has a plan. I hadn't intended to tell you this, but he doesn't plan to make you go through with it. He thinks Grimm will come."

Jillian snorted. "So did I, Mama. But it's ten minutes to the hour and there's no sign of the man. What's Da going to do? Halt the wedding in the middle if he doesn't show up? In front of five hundred guests?"

"You know your da has never been afraid of making a spectacle of himself—or of anyone else, for that matter. The man abducted me from my wedding. I do believe he's hoping the same will happen to you."

Jillian smiled faintly. The story of her mama's "courtship" by her da had enthralled her since she'd been a child. Her da was a man who could give Grimm lessons. Grimm Roderick shouldn't be battling himself about her, he should be battling the world *for* her. Jillian drew a deep breath, hoping against hope, imagining such a scene for herself.

* * * * *

"We are gathered here today in the company of family, friends, and well-wishers

to unite this man and woman in the holy, unbreakable bonds..."

Jillian blew furiously at her veil. Although it puffed a bit, it didn't clear her view. The preacher was slightly blue, Quinn was slightly blue. Irritably she plucked at the veil. No rose-colored hues for her on her wedding day, and why should there be? Outside the tall windows, sleet fell in vaguely blue sheets.

She stole a glance at Quinn, who stood at her side. She was eye level with his chest. Despite her despair, she conceded he was a magnificent man. Regally clad in ceremonial tartan, he'd pulled his long hair back from his chiseled face. Most women would be thrilled to be standing beside him, saying the vows of a lifetime, accompanying him to be mistress of his estate, to give him bonny blond bairns and live in splendor for the rest of their days.

But he was the wrong man. *He'll come for me, he'll come for me, I know he will*, Jillian repeated silently as if it were a magic spell she could weave from the fibers of sheer redundancy.

* * * * *

Grimm plucked another bann from the wall of a church as he sped by. He crumpled it and crammed it in a satchel that was overflowing with balled-up parchment. He'd been in the tiny highland village of Tummas when he'd seen the first bann, nailed to the side of a ramshackle bothy. Twenty paces beyond it he'd found the second, then the third and the fourth.

Jillian St. Clair was marrying Quinn de Moncreiffe. He'd cursed furiously. How long had she waited? Two days? He hadn't slept that night, consumed by a rage so violent that it had threatened to release the Berserker without any bloodshed to bring it on.

The rage had only intensified, goading him to Occam's back, sending him in circles around the Highlands. He'd ridden to the edge of Caithness, turned around, and come back, ripping down banns all the way, ranging like a maddened beast from Lowland to Highland. Then he turned around again, compelled to Caithness by a force beyond his understanding, a force that reached into the very marrow of his bones. Grimm tossed his braids out of his face and growled. In the forest nearby, a wolf responded with a mournful howl.

He'd had the dream again last night. The one in which Jillian watched him turn

Berserk. The one in which she laid her palm against his chest and looked into his eyes and they connected—Jillian and the beast. In his dream, Grimm had realized the beast loved Jillian as deeply as the man, and was just as incapable of ever harming her. In the light of day, he no longer feared that he might hurt Jillian, not even with the threat of his da's madness. He knew himself well enough to know that not even in the wildest throes of Berserker gang could he harm her.

But in his dream, as Jillian had searched his blazing, unholy eyes, fear and revulsion had marked her lovely features. She'd extended a hand palm out to stay him, begging him to go far away as quickly as Occam could carry him.

The Berserker had made a pathetic sound while the man's heart slowly iced over, cooler than the ice-blue eyes that had witnessed so much loss. In his dream, he'd fled for the cover of darkness to hide from her horrified gaze.

Once Quinn had asked him what could kill a Berserker, and now he knew.

A thing so slight as the look on Jillian's face.

He'd woken from the dream filled with despair. Today was Jillian's wedding, and if dreams were portents, she would never forgive him for what he was about to do should she ever uncover his true nature.

But need she ever know?

He would hide the Berserker inside him forever if necessary. He would never again save anyone, never fight, never view blood; he would never reveal himself. He would live as a mere man. They would stop at Dalkeith, where the

Hawk stored a considerable fortune for Grimm, and, with enough gold to buy her a castle in any country, they would flee far from the treacherous McKane and those who knew his secret.

If she would still have him.

He knew what he was about to do was not the honorable thing, but truth be told, he no longer cared. God forgive him—he was a Berserker who likely suffered his da's madness somewhere in his veins, but he could not stand by and permit Jillian St. Clair to wed another man while he still lived and breathed.

Now he understood what she'd known instinctively, years ago, the day he'd stepped out of the woods and stood looking down at her.

Jillian St. Clair was his.

* * * * *

The hour was approaching noon and he was no more than three miles from Caithness when he was ambushed.



CHAPTER 24

YE GODS! JILLIAN DRIFTED BACK FROM HER WANDERING thoughts, alarmed. The pudgy priest was almost to the "I do" part. Jillian craned her neck, searching frantically for her father, with no success. The Greathall was crammed to overflowing; guests angled up the staircase, hung over the balustrade, and were stuffed into every nook and cranny.

Fear gripped her. What if her mother had made up the story of her father's plan merely as a ruse to get her to stand up in front of the crowd? What if her mama had deliberately lied, wagering that once they got to the vows, Jillian wouldn't have the nerve to dishonor her parents and Quinn, not to mention herself, by refusing to wed him?

"If there are any here today who know some reason why these two should remain separate, speak now or forever haud yer wheesht."

The hall was silent.

The pause stretched over the length of several heartbeats.

As it lengthened intolerably into minutes, people began to yawn, shuffle their feet, and stretch impatiently.

Silence.

Jillian puffed at her veil and peeked at Quinn. He stood ramrod straight beside her, his hands clasped. She whispered his name, but either he didn't hear or he refused to acknowledge it. She peered at the priest, who seemed to have fallen into a trance, gazing at the bound volume in his hands.

What on earth was going on? She tapped her foot and waited for her da to say something to bring this debacle to a screeching halt.

"I said, if there are any here who see some reason..." the priest intoned dramatically.

More silence.

Jillian's nerves stretched to breaking. What was she doing? If her da wouldn't rescue her, to hell with him. She refused to be cowed by fear of scandal. She was her father's daughter, by God, and he'd never genuflected to the false idol of propriety. She puffed at her veil, flipped it back impatiently, and scowled at the priest. "Oh, for goodness' sake—"

"Don't get snippy with me, missy," the priest snapped. "I'm just doing my job."

Jillian's courage was momentarily quaffed by his unexpected rebuke.

Quinn caught her hand in his. "Is something wrong, Jillian? Are you feeling unwell? Your face is flushed." His gaze was full of concern and... sympathy?

"I—*can't marry you*" is what she started to say when the doors to the Greathall burst open, crushing several unsuspecting people against the wall. Her words were swallowed in the din of indignant squeals and yelps.

All eyes flew to the entrance.

A great gray stallion reared up in the doorway, its breath frosting the air with puffs of steam. It was a scene from every fairy-tale romance she'd ever read: the handsome prince bursting into the castle astride a magnificent stallion, ablaze with desire and honor as he'd declared his undying love before all and sundry. Her heart swelled with joy.

Then her brow puckered as she scrutinized her "prince." Well, it was almost like a fairy tale. Except this prince was dressed in nothing but a drenched and muddy tartan with blood on his face and hands and war braids plaited at his temples. Although determination glittered in his gaze, a declaration of undying love didn't appear to be his first priority.

"Jillian!" he roared.

Her knees buckled. His voice brought her violently to life. Everything in the room receded and there was only Grimm, blue eyes blazing, his massive frame filling the doorway. He was majestic, towering, and ruthless. *Here* was her fierce warrior ready to battle the world to gain her love.

He urged Occam into the crowd, making his way toward the altar.

"Grimm," she whispered.

He drew up beside her. Sliding from Occam's back, he dropped to the floor next to the bride and groom. He looked at Quinn. The two men gazed at each other a tense moment, then Quinn inclined his head the merest fraction and stepped back a pace. The Greathall hushed as five hundred guests stood riveted by the unfolding spectacle.

Grimm was at a sudden loss for words. Jillian was so beautiful, a goddess clad in shimmering satin. He was covered with blood, mud-stained and filthy, while behind them stood the incomparable Quinn, impeccably attired, titled and noble—Quinn, who had all he lacked.

The blood on his hands was a relentless reminder that despite his fervent vows to conceal the Berserker, the McKane would always be there. They'd been lying in wait for him today. What if they attacked when he was traveling with Jillian? Four had escaped him. The others were dead. But those four were trouble enough—they would round up more men and continue hunting Grimm until either the last McKane was dead, or he was. Along with anyone traveling with him.

What could he hope to accomplish by taking her now? What fool's dream had possessed him to come here today? What desperate hope had convinced him he might be able to hide his true nature from her? And how would he survive the look on her face when she saw him for what he really was? "I'm a bloody fool," he muttered.

A smile curved Jillian's lip. "Yes, that you've been on more than one occasion, Grimm Roderick. You were most foolish when you left me, but I do believe I might forgive you now that you've come back."

Grimm sucked in a harsh breath. Berserker be damned, he had to have her.

"Will you come with me, Jillian?" *Say yes, woman*, he prayed.

A simple nod was her immediate response.

His chest swelled with unexpected emotion. "I'm sorry, Quinn," Grimm said. He wanted to say more, but Quinn shook his head, leaned close, and whispered something in Grimm's ear. Grimm's jaw tensed, and they stared at each other in

silence. Finally Grimm nodded.

"Then you go with my blessing," Quinn said clearly.

Grimm extended his arms to Jillian, who slipped into his embrace. Before he could succumb to the urge to kiss her senseless, he tossed her on Occam's back and mounted behind her.

Jillian scanned the worried faces around her. Ramsay was gazing at Grimm with a shocking amount of hatred in his eyes, and she was momentarily flustered by the intensity of it. Quinn's expression was a blend of concern and reluctant understanding. She finally spotted her da where he stood with her mother a dozen feet away. Elizabeth's face was grim. Gibraltar held her gaze a moment, then nodded encouragingly.

Jillian leaned back into Grimm's broad chest and gave a small sigh of pleasure. "I would live any kind of life I had to live, so long as I lived it with you, Grimm Roderick."

It was all he needed to hear. His arms tightened around her waist, he knelt Occam forward and together they fled Caithness.

* * * * *

"Now that's my idea of how a man takes a woman to wife," Gibraltar observed with satisfaction.

AN ILLYOCH PROPHECY

Legend tells that the

*Clan Illyoch will prosper for one thousand years,
birthing warriors who will accomplish great good
for Alba.*

*In the fertile vale of Tuluth a castle shall rise
around the Hall of Gods and many shall covet
what belongs to Scotia's blessed race.*

*The seers warn that an envious clan shall pursue
the Illyoch until they are but three. The three will
be scattered like seeds uprooted by the wind of
betrayal, cast far and wide, and all will appear to
be lost. Much grief and despair will descend upon
the holy vale.*

*But harken to hope, sons of Odin, for the three
shall be gathered by his far-reaching grasp. When
the young Illyoch finds his true mate, she shall bring
him home, the enemy shall be vanquished, and the
Illyoch shall thrive for a thousand years more.*

CHAPTER 25

THEY RODE HARD UNTIL EARLY EVENING, WHEN GRIMM drew Occam to a stop in a copse of trees. Upon leaving Caithness, he'd tugged a plaid from his pack and secured it tightly around Jillian's body, forming a nearly waterproof barrier between her and the elements.

He hadn't uttered a word since then. His face had been so grim that she'd kept her silence, allowing him time and privacy to muddle through his thoughts. She'd nestled back against him, contentedly savoring the press of his hard body against hers. Grimm Roderick had come for her. While such an inauspicious beginning might not be the perfect way to start a life together, it would do. For Grimm Roderick to steal a woman from her wedding, he must intend to care for her the rest of her life, and that's all she'd ever desired—a life with him.

By the time he drew Occam to a halt, the freezing rain had abated but the temperature had plummeted. Winter was encroaching, and she suspected they were headed directly for the Highlands, where the chill winds gusted with twice the vigor as in the Lowlands. She clutched the plaid snugly around her, sealing out the cold air.

Grimm dismounted, lowered her from the saddle, and held her for a moment. "God, I missed you, Jillian." The words exploded from him.

She tossed her head, delighted. "What took you so long, Grimm?"

His expression was impossible to interpret. He glanced self-consciously at his hands, which were badly in need of a washing. He busied himself with a flagon of water and a scrap of clean plaid for a moment, removing the worst of the stains. "I had a wee bit of a skirmish on the way and..." he mumbled inaudibly.

She studied his disheveled clothing but decided not to ask him about it then. The mud and blood appeared to be from a recent fight, but what had happened in the last few days wasn't her first concern. "That's not what I meant. It took you over a month. Was it so difficult for you to decide if you wanted me?" She forced a teasing smile to camouflage the wounded part of her that was utterly serious.

"Never think that, Jillian. I wake up wanting you. I fall asleep wanting you. I

watch a magnificent sunrise and can think only of sharing it with you. I glimpse a piece of amber and see your eyes. Jillian, I've caught a disease, and the fever abates only when I'm near you."

She flashed him a radiant smile. "You're nearly forgiven. So tell me—what took you so long? Is it that you think you're not good enough for me, Grimm Roderick? Because you're not titled, I mean." When he didn't respond, she hastened to reassure him. "I don't care, you know. A title doesn't make the man, and you're certainly the finest man that I've ever known. What on earth do you think is wrong with you?"

His stubborn silence didn't serve as the deterrent he intended; she scurried down an alternate route of inquiry. "Quinn told me that you think your father is mad and you're afraid you've inherited the madness. He said it was nonsense and I must tell you I agree, because you're the most intelligent man I've ever met—except for the times when you don't trust me, which evidences a glaring lapse in your customary good judgment."

Grimm stared at her, disconcerted. "What else did Quinn tell you?"

"That you love me," she said simply.

He swept her into his embrace in one swift move. He buried his hands in her hair and kissed her urgently. She savored the rock-hard press of his body against hers, his teasing tongue, his strong hands cupping her face. Jillian melted against him, wordlessly demanding more. The past month without him, followed by hours pressed against his muscled body as they'd ridden, had begun a slow burn of desire within her. For the past hour, her skin had tingled at every point of contact with his body, and a trembling heat had gathered in her midsection, seeping lower, awakening shockingly intense feelings of desire. She'd been oblivious to the terrain, her mind fully occupied with imagining, in blush-inducing detail, the many different ways she wanted to make love with him.

Now she practically vibrated with need, and she responded wildly to his kiss. Her body was already prepared for him, and she pressed encouragingly against his hips.

He stopped kissing her as suddenly as he'd begun. "We must continue riding," he said tightly. "We have a long way to go, lass. I doona wish to keep you out here

in the cold any longer than I must."

He pulled away so abruptly that Jillian gaped at him and nearly screamed with frustration. She was so heated from his kiss that the chill air was inconsequential, and she certainly had no intention of waiting even a moment longer to make love with him again.

She let her eyes flutter slowly closed and swayed a bit. Grimm eyed her intently. "Are you feeling all right, lass?"

"No," Jillian replied, casting him a sidelong glance beneath her lowered lashes. "Frankly, I feel decidedly odd, Grimm, and I don't know what to make of it."

He moved back to her side instantly, and she prepared to spring her trap.

"Where do you feel odd, Jillian? Have I—"

"Here." She swiftly took his hand and placed it on her breast. "And here." She guided his other hand to her hips.

Grimm took several deep breaths and blew them out, willing his thundering heart to slow, to quit pumping so much blood to his loins and perhaps let his brain in on the bargain so he might entertain a coherent thought. "Jillian," he said, exhaling a frustrated breath.

"Well, my," she said mischievously, moving her hands over his body. "You seem to be suffering the same ailment." Her hand closed over him through his plaid, and he made a low, growling sound deep in his throat.

They both spoke at once.

"It's freezing out here, lass. I won't subject you—"

"I'm not—"

"—to the cold for my own selfish needs—"

"—fragile, Grimm. And what about *my* selfish needs?"

"—and I can't make love to you properly outside!"

"Oh, and is *properly* the only way you've ever wanted me?" she mocked.

His gaze locked with hers, and his eyes darkened with desire. He seemed immobilized, obtusely assessing the cold, considering all of her needs—except for the one that really mattered.

In a low voice she said, "Do it. Take me. *Now*."

His eyes narrowed and he sucked in a harsh breath. "*Jillian*." A storm gathered in his ice-blue eyes, and she wondered for a moment what she'd called forth. A beast—*her* beast. And she wanted him exactly the way he was.

The force of his passion hit her like a sea gale, hot and salty and primitive in its power, holding nothing back. They exploded against each other, driving their bodies as close together as they could. He backed her against a tree, thrust her gown up, and pushed his plaid aside, all the while kissing her eyelids, her nose, her lips, plunging his tongue so deeply into her mouth that she felt herself drowning in the man's sensuality.

"I need you, Jillian St. Clair. Ever since I tossed you up on my horse I've been wanting nothing more than to drag you back off it and bury myself in you, without a word of explanation or apology—because I need you."

"Yes," she whispered fervently. "*That's* what I want!"

With a swift stroke he plunged deeply into her, but the storm was in her body and it raged with the devastating fury of a hurricane.

She tossed her head back and freed her voice, crying out to him, only the creatures of the wilderness to hear. She moved against him urgently, her hips rising to meet every thrust. Her hands clawed at his shoulders and she raised her legs, wrapping them tightly around his waist, locking her ankles over his muscled hips. With each thrust he pressed her back against the tree trunk and she used it to rock herself back into him, taking him as deeply into her body as she could. Only the sounds of passion escaped their lips; words simply weren't needed. Bonding and pledging through contact, their bodies spoke in a tongue ancient and unmistakable.

"Jillian!" he roared as he exploded inside her. An unfettered laugh of delight escaped her as the rush of his liquid warmth inside her pushed her over the edge of pleasure, and she bucked against him.

They held on to each other for a reverent moment. Leaning against her in a soft crush, he seemed reluctant to move, as if he wanted to stay joined to her forever. And when he began to stiffen inside her, she knew she'd convinced him that a little cold air was good for the soul.

* * * * *

Grimm whistled for Occam. Summoning his horse from the woods, he tightened the tethers on the packs. It was full dark, and they needed to be on their way. There was no shelter to be secured tonight, but by the following day they would be far enough into the Highlands that he could provide shelter for them each night to come. He glanced over his shoulder at Jillian. It was imperative to him that he keep her happy, warm, and safe. "Are you hungry, Jillian? Are you dry enough? Warm enough?"

"No, yes, and yes. Where are we going, Grimm?" she asked, still feeling dreamy from their intense lovemaking.

"There's an abandoned cottage a day's ride from here."

"I didn't mean now, I meant where are you taking me after that?"

Grimm pondered his answer. He'd originally planned to ride directly to Dalkeith, then leave as soon as they'd gathered his fortune and loaded the horses. But he'd begun to think running might not be necessary. He'd spent much of their time on the ride from Caithness mulling over something Quinn had said. *Hell, man, rouse an army and fight the McKane once and for all. I know scores of men who would fight for you. I would.* As would the Hawk's army, as well as many of the men he'd known at court, men who fought for hire.

Grimm loathed the idea of taking Jillian away from Scotland, from her family. He knew what it was like to be without a clan. If he triumphed over the McKane, he could purchase an estate near her family and have only one demon to battle. He could devote his energy to concealing his nature and making Jillian a fine husband.

Promise me you'll tell her the truth, Quinn had demanded in a low, urgent whisper against his ear.

Grimm had nodded.

But he hadn't said when, he prevaricated lamely as he studied her innocent features. Maybe next year, or a lifetime from now. In the meantime, he had other battles to wage.

"Dalkeith. My good friend and his wife are laird and lady there. You'll be safe with them."

Jillian snapped to attention, dreamy reverie squashed by the thought of an impending separation. "What do you mean, I will be safe there? Don't you mean *we* will be safe there?"

Grimm fidgeted with Occam's saddle.

"Grimm—*we*, right?"

He muttered, deliberately incoherent.

Jillian eyed him a moment and snorted delicately.

"Grimm, you don't plan to take me to Dalkeith and leave me there by myself, do you?" Her eyes narrowed, forecasting a tempest if such was his intention.

Without raising his head from an intent inspection of Occam's tethers, he replied, "Only for a time, Jillian. There's something I must do, and I need to know you'll be safe while I'm doing it."

Jillian watched him fidget and considered her options. "His good friend and his wife," he'd said, people who would know something about her man of mystery. That was promising, if not her preference. She wished he would confide in her, tell her what kept him solitary, but she would work with what she could get. Maybe what had happened in his past was too painful for him to discuss. "Where is Dalkeith?"

"In the Highlands."

"Near where you were born?"

"Past there. We have to circle around Tuluth to get to Dalkeith."

"Why circle around it? Why not ride through it?" Jillian fished.

"Because I've never gone back to Tuluth and I doona plan to now. Besides, the village was destroyed."

"Well, if it was destroyed, that makes it even odder to ride around it. Why avoid nothing?"

Grimm raised a brow. "Must you always be so logical?"

"Must you always be so evasive?" she countered, arching a brow of her own.

"I just doona wish to ride through it, all right?"

"Are you certain it's in ruins?"

When Grimm buried a hand in his hair, Jillian finally understood. The only time Grimm Roderick started messing with his hair was when she asked him a question he didn't want to answer. She almost laughed; if she continued questioning him he might rip it out by the handfuls. But she needed answers, and occasionally her digging resulted in a few treasures. What could possibly make him avoid Tuluth like the darkest plague? "Oh, my goodness," she breathed as intuition pointed an unerring finger toward the truth. "Your family is still alive, aren't they, Grimm?"

Ice-blue eyes flew to hers, and she watched him struggle to avoid her question. He toyed with his war braids and she bit her lip, waiting.

"My da is still alive," he conceded.

Although she'd already arrived at such a conclusion herself, his admission threw her off balance. "What else didn't you tell me, Grimm?"

"That Quinn told you the truth. He's an insane old man," Grimm said bitterly.

"Truly insane, or do you mean you just disagree about things, like most people do with their parents?"

"I doona wish to talk about it."

"How old is your da? Have you other family I don't know about?"

Grimm walked away and started pacing. "No."

"Well, what is your home like? In Tuluth."

"It's not in Tuluth," he said through set teeth. "My home was in a bleak, dreary castle carved into the mountain above Tuluth."

Jillian wondered what other astonishing things might be revealed if he kept answering her questions. "If your home was in the castle, then you must be either a servant—" She eyed him from head to toe and shook her head as comprehension crashed over her. "Oh! Here I am prattling on about titles and you don't even say anything! You're a chieftain's son, aren't you? You wouldn't, by chance, be his oldest son, would you?" she asked, mostly in jest. When he quickly averted his gaze, she exclaimed, "You mean you'll be the laird one day? There's a clan awaiting your return?"

"Never. I will never return to Tuluth, and that's the end of this discussion. My da is a batty old bastard and the castle is in ruins. Along with the village, half my clan was destroyed years ago, and I'm certain the remaining half scattered to escape the old man and rebuild elsewhere. I doubt there's anyone left in Tuluth at all—it's likely nothing but ruins." He stole a surreptitious glance at Jillian to see how she was taking his confession.

Jillian's mind was whirling. Something didn't make sense, and she knew she was lacking vital information. Grimm's childhood home lay between here and their destination, and answers lay in the moldering old ruin. A "batty old da" and insight that would show her the way to Grimm's deepest heart.

"Why did you leave?" she asked gently.

He faced her, his blue eyes glittering in the fading light. "Jillian, please. Not so many questions at once. Give me time. These things... I haven't spoken of them since they happened." His eyes wordlessly pleaded with her for patience and understanding.

"Time, I can give. I'll be patient, but I won't give up."

"Promise me that." He was suddenly grave. "Promise me you'll never give up, no matter what."

"On you? I wouldn't. Goodness, as mean as you were to me when I was a wee lass, I still didn't give up on you," she said lightly, hoping to brighten his somber

expression.

"On *us*, Jillian. Promise me you'll never give up on us." He rugged her back into his arms and gazed down at her so intensely, it nearly took her breath away.

"I promise," she breathed. "And I take my honor as seriously as any warrior."

He relaxed infinitesimally, hoping he'd never need to remind her of her words.

"Are you certain you're not hungry yet?" He changed the subject swiftly.

"I can wait until we stop for the night," she assured him absently, too occupied with her thoughts to consider physical demands. She no longer wondered why he had appeared so late, bloody and mud-stained. He had come, and that was enough for now.

There were other, bigger questions she needed answered.

As they remounted, he drew her against him and she relaxed, relishing the feel of his hard body.

A few hours later, she reached a decision. *A lass has to do what a lass has to do*, she told herself firmly. By morning she planned to acquire a sudden case of inexplicable illness that would demand they secure permanent shelter long before they reached Dalkeith. She had no idea that, by morning, serendipity would take charge of events for her with a twisted sense of humor.

CHAPTER 26

JILLIAN ROLLED OVER, STRETCHED, AND PEERED through the dim light at Grimm. Furs hung over the windows of the cottage. They barred entrance to the bitter wind, but also permitted little light. The fire had burned down to embers hours ago, and in the amber glow that remained he looked like a bronzed warrior, a heroic, mighty Viking stretched out on the pallet of furs with one arm bent behind his head, the other curled about her waist.

By the saints, but the man was beautiful! In repose, his face had the kind of perfection that made one think of an archangel, created by a joyous God. His brows winged in black arches above eyes that were fringed with thick lashes. Although tiny lines splayed out from the corners of his eyes, he had few laugh lines around his mouth, a lack she intended to remedy. His nose was straight and proud, his lips... she could spend a day just gazing at those firm pink lips that curved sensually even in his sleep. She dropped a whisper-light kiss upon the stubborn cleft in his chin.

When they'd arrived the night before, Grimm had built a roaring fire and melted buckets of snow for a bath. They'd shared a tub, shivering in the frigid air until the heat of passion had warmed them to the bone. On a lush pile of furs, they'd wordlessly renewed their pledge to each other. The man was patently inexhaustible, she thought contentedly. Her body ached pleasantly from the marathon lovemaking. He'd shown her things that made her cheeks flame and her heart race in anticipation of more.

Steamy thoughts decamped abruptly when her stomach chose that moment to lurch alarmingly. Rendered momentarily breathless from the sudden nausea, she curled on her side and waited for the feeling to recede. As they'd had little to eat last night and been very active, she concluded she was probably hungry. An aching tummy would certainly make her plan to convince Grimm she was too sick to ride to Dalkeith easier to enact. What illness could she claim? An upset stomach might not be convincing enough to make him consider stopping in a village he'd sworn never to see again.

Conveniently, another wave of nausea gripped her. She scowled as the possibility occurred to her that she'd actually made herself ill merely by planning to pretend

she was. She lay motionless, waiting for the discomfort to subside, and conjured visions of her favorite food, hoping that imagination would quaff the hunger pains.

Thoughts of Kaley's pork roast nearly doubled her over. Baked fish in wine sauce had her gagging in an instant. Bread? That didn't sound so bad. The crustier the better. She tried to inch away from Grimm to snatch the satchel where she'd seen a loaf of brown bread the night before, but in his sleep he tightened his arm around her waist. Stealthily she worked at his fingers, but they were like iron vises. As a fresh wave of nausea assaulted her, she moaned and curled into a ball, clutching her stomach. The sound woke Grimm instantly.

"Are you all right, lass? Did I hurt you?" Afraid he was referring to their excessive lovemaking, she hastened to reassure him. She didn't wish to give him any reason to think twice before bestowing such pleasure on her again. "I'm only a bit sore," she said, then groaned as her stomach heaved again.

"What is it?" Grimm shot up in bed, and despite her misery she marveled at his beauty. His black hair fell about his face, and although the thought of food made her feel impossibly queasy, his lips still looked inviting.

"Did I harm you in my sleep?" he asked hoarsely. "What is it? Talk to me, lass!"

"I just don't feel well. I don't know what's wrong. My stomach hurts."

"Would food help?" He scuffled through the packs rapidly. Uncovering a large piece of greasy, salted beef, he thrust it beneath her nose.

"Oh, no!" she wailed, lunging to her knees. She scuttled away from him as quickly as possible, but made it only a few feet before retching. He was at her side in a heartbeat, smoothing the hair back from her face. "Don't," she cried. "Don't even look at me." Jillian hadn't been sick much in her life, but when she had she loathed anyone seeing her weakened by forces beyond her control. It made her feel helpless.

She was probably being punished for planning to be deceitful. That was hardly fair, she thought crossly. She'd never been deceitful in her life—surely she was entitled to one time, especially since it was for a such good cause. They had to stop at Tuluth. She needed answers that she suspected could be found only by

returning to Grimm's roots.

"Hush, lass, it's all right. What can I do? What do you need?" It couldn't be poison, Grimm thought frantically. He'd prepared the food they'd eaten last night himself, of venison he'd tracked and cured while up in the Highlands. Then what was it? he wondered, deluged by a flood of emotions: helplessness, fear, realization that this woman in his arms meant everything to him and that he would take whatever sickness she had and bear it himself, if he could.

She convulsed again in his arms, and he held her trembling body.

It was some time before she stopped heaving. When she finally calmed, he wrapped her in a warm blanket and heated some water over the fire. She lay absolutely still while he washed her face. He was transfixed by her beauty; despite her illness Jillian certainly did seem radiant, her skin a translucent ivory, her lips deep pink, her cheeks flushed with rose.

"Are you feeling better, lass?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "I think so. But I'm not certain I can ride very far today. Is there a place we might stop between here and Dalkeith?" she asked, plaintively.

"Perhaps we shouldn't go at all," he hedged, but they had to move on, and he knew it. Linger here another day was the most dangerous thing he could do. If the McKane were following, one more day might well cost them their lives. He closed his eyes and pondered the dilemma. What if they started off again and she became sicker? Where could he take her? Where could they hide away until she was well enough to travel?

Of course, he thought sardonically.

Tuluth.

CHAPTER 27

AS THEY NEARED THE VILLAGE OF HIS BIRTH, GRIMM lapsed into a protracted silence.

They'd ridden at an easy gait through the day, and Jillian had rapidly recovered her customary vigor. Despite her improved health, she forced herself to continue the charade. They were too close to Tuluth for her to waffle in indecision.

They had to go to Tuluth. It was necessary, whether she condoned her methods or not. She suffered no delusions that Grimm would return voluntarily. If he had his way he'd forget the village ever existed. While she accepted the fact that Grimm couldn't bring himself to talk about his past, she had a suspicion that returning to Tuluth might be more necessary for him than it was for her. It was possible he needed to confront his memories in order to lay them to rest.

For her part, she needed to examine the evidence with her own eyes and hands, speak with his "batty" da, and fish for information. In the rubble and debris of the destroyed castle she might find clues to help her understand the man she loved.

Jillian glanced down at his hand, so big it nearly cupped both of hers, while he guided Occam with the other one. What could he possibly think was wrong with him? He was noble and honest, with the exception of speaking about his past. He was strong, fearless, and one of the best warriors she'd ever seen. The man was virtually invincible. Why, he put the legends of those mythical beasts, the Berserkers, to shame.

Jillian smiled, thinking men like Grimm were where such legends were born. Why, he even had the legendary fierce blue eyes. If such beings truly existed, he might have been one of those mighty warriors, she thought dreamily. She hadn't been surprised to learn he was the son of a chieftain; nobility was evident in every line of his magnificent face. She released a sigh of pleasure and leaned back into his chest.

"We're nearly there, lass," he said comfortingly, misinterpreting the sigh.

"Will we be going to the castle?" she asked weakly.

"No. There are some caves where we can take shelter on a cliff called Wotan's Cleft. I played there when I was a boy. I know them well."

"Wouldn't the castle be warmer? I'm so cold, Grimm." She shivered in what she hoped was a convincing manner.

"If my memory serves me, Maldebann is a shambles." He tucked the plaid more securely about her shoulders and cradled her in the heat from his body. "I'm not certain any of the walls are standing. Besides, if my da is still around anywhere he probably haunts those crumbling halls."

"Well, how about the village? Surely some of your people remained?" She refused to succeed in her bid to reach Tuluth but he denied contact with people who might know something about her Highland warrior.

"Jillian, the entire valley was wiped out. I suspect it will be completely deserted. We'll be lucky if the caves are still passable. A lot of the passageways shifted, even collapsed into rubble during the years I played there."

"More reason to go to the castle," she said quickly. "It sounds as if the caves are dangerous."

Grimm expelled a breath. "You're persistent, aren't you, lass?"

"I'm just so cold," she whimpered, pushing away the guilt she felt about being deceitful. It was for a good cause.

His arms tightened around her. "I'll take care of you, Jillian, I promise."

* * * * *

"Where are they, Gilles?" Ronin asked.

"Nearly three miles east, milord."

Ronin plucked nervously at his tartan and turned to his brother. "Do I look all right?"

Balder grinned. "'Do I look all right?' " he mocked in falsetto, preening for an imaginary audience.

Ronin punched him in the arm. "Stop it, Balder. This is important. I'm meetin'

my son's wife today."

"You're seein' your *son* today," Balder corrected.

Ronin cast his gaze to the stones. "Aye, that I am," he said finally. His head whipped back and he glanced at Balder anxiously. "What if he still hates me, Balder? What if he rides up, spits in my face, and leaves?"

The grin faded from Balder's lips. "Then I'll beat the lad senseless, tie him up, and we'll both be talkin' to him. Persuasively and at our leisure."

Ronin's face brightened considerably. "Now, there's a plan," he said optimistically. "Maybe we could do that straightaway, what say you?"

"*Ronin.*"

Ronin shrugged. "It just seems the most direct course," he said defensively.

Balder assessed his brother, his nervous, callused fingers smoothing the ceremonial tartan. His sleekly combed black hair, liberally sprinkled with silver. His jeweled *sgain dubh* and velvet sporran. His wide shoulders and not-so-trim waist. He stood taller and with more pride than Balder had seen him stand in years. His blue eyes reflected joy, hope, and... fear. "You look like every inch a fine laird, brother," Balder said gently. "Any son would be proud to call you da."

Ronin took a deep breath and nodded tightly. "Let's hope you're right. Are the banners hung, Gilles?"

Gilles grinned and nodded. "You do look regal, milord," he added proudly. "And I must say Tuluth has made a fine showing for us. The valley fairly sparkles. Any lad would be pleased to see this as his future demesne."

"And the Hall of Lords, has it been cleaned and opened? Are the torches lit?"

"Yes, milord, and I've hung the portrait in the dining hall."

Ronin gulped a breath of air and began pacing. "The villagers have been informed? All of them?"

"They're waitin' in the streets, Ronin, and the banners have been hung throughout Tuluth as well. It's a fine homecoming you've planned," Balder said.

"Let's just hope he thinks so," Ronin muttered, pacing.

* * * * *

Grimm's fingers tightened on Jillian's waist as Occam carefully picked his way up the back pass to Wotan's Cleft.

He had no intention of taking Jillian to the cold damp caves where a fire could smoke them out if the wind suddenly changed course down one of the tunnels, but from the Cleft he could assess the village and the castle. If any part of it was still standing, he could scan for smoke from a hearth if anyone inhabited the ghost village. Besides, he preferred Jillian to see immediately what a desolate place it was so she might wish to hurry on to Dalkeith as soon as she was able. She seemed to be making a rapid recovery, although she was still weak and complained of intermittent queasiness.

The sun topped the peak of the Cleft. It wouldn't set for several more hours, allowing him ample time to assess the potential dangers and secure shelter somewhere in the ruined village. If Jillian was well tomorrow morning they could race for the shores of Dalkeith. To avoid leading the McKane to the Douglas estate, he planned to stop in a nearby village and send a messenger for Hawk. They would meet discreetly to discuss the possibility of raising an army and plan Jillian's and his future.

As the tall standing stones of Wotan's Cleft came into view, Grimm's chest tightened painfully. He forced himself to take deep, even breaths as they navigated the rocky path. He hadn't anticipated the force with which his bitter memories would resurface. He'd last climbed this path fifteen years ago and it had forever changed his life. *Hear me, Odin! I summon the Berserker...* He'd ascended a boy and descended a monster.

His hands fisted. How could he have considered coming back here? But Jillian snuggled against him, seeking warmth, and he knew he would enter Tuluth willingly even if it were occupied by hordes of demons, to keep her safe and warm.

"Are you all right, Grimm?"

How typically Jillian, he marveled. Despite her own sickness, her concern was for him. "I'm fine. We'll be warm soon, lass. Just rest."

He sounded so worried that Jillian had to bite her tongue to prevent an instant confession from escaping.

"In just a moment you'll be able to see where the village used to be," he said, sorrow roughening his voice.

"I can't imagine what it would be like to see Caithness destroyed. I didn't mean to bring you back to a place that is so painful..."

"It happened many years ago. It's almost as if it happened in another lifetime."

Jillian sat up straight as they topped the crest and searched the landscape with curious eyes.

"There." Grimm directed her attention to the cliff. "From the promontory the whole valley comes into view." He smiled faintly. "I used to come up here and look out over the land, thinking that a lad had never been born luckier than I."

Jillian winced. Occam moved forward, his gait steady. Jillian held her breath as they approached the edge.

"The caves lie behind us, beyond that tumble of stones where the slope of the mountain is steepest. My best friend Arron and I once vowed we would map out every tunnel, every chamber in that mountain, but the passages seemed to go on forever. We'd nearly mapped out a quarter of it before... before..."

Remorse for dragging him back to face his demons flooded her. "Was your friend killed in the battle?"

"Aye."

"Was your da hurt in the battle?" she asked gently.

"He should have died," Grimm said tightly. "The McKane buried a battle-ax in his chest clear to the hilt. It's amazing he survived. For several years after, I assumed he had died."

"And your mother?" she said in a whisper.

There was a silence, broken only by the sound of shale crushing beneath Occam's hooves. "We'll be able to see it any moment, lass."

Jillian's gaze fixed on the cliff's edge where the rock terminated abruptly and became the horizon. Hundreds of feet down she would find the ashes of Tuluth. She drew herself up straighter, nearly tumbling from the horse in her anxiety, and braced herself for the grim scene.

"Hold, lass," Grimm soothed as they took the last few steps to the cliff and gazed out over the lifeless valley.

For nearly five minutes he didn't speak. Jillian wasn't certain he breathed. On the other hand, she wasn't certain she did either.

Below them, nestled around a crystalline river and several sparkling lochs, a vibrant city teemed with life, white huts washed to soft amber by the afternoon sun. Hundreds of homes dotted the valley in even rows along meticulously maintained roads. Smoke from cozy fires spiraled lazily from flues, and although she couldn't hear the voices, she could see children running and playing. People walked up and down the roads where an occasional lamb or cow wandered. Two wolfhounds played in a small garden. Along the main roadway that ran down the center of the city, brilliantly colored banners waved and flapped in the breeze.

Astonished, she scanned the valley, following the river to the face of the mountain. It bubbled from an underground source at the mountain's base, the castle towering in stone above it. Her hand flew to her lips to smother a cry of shock. This was not what she'd expected to see.

A bleak and dreary castle, he'd called it.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Castle Maldebann was the most beautiful castle she'd ever laid eyes on. With its exquisitely carved towers and regal face, it looked as if it had been liberated from the mountain by the hammer and chisel of a visionary sculptor. Constructed of pale gray stone, it rose in mighty arches to a breathtaking height. The mountain effectively sealed the valley at that end and the castle sprawled along the entire width of the closure, wings stretching east and west from the castle proper.

Its mighty towers made Caithness look like a summer cottage—nay, like a child's tree loft. No wonder Castle Maldebann had been the focus of an attack; it was an incredible, enviable stronghold. The guard walk at the top was dotted with dozens of uniformed figures. The entrance was visible beyond the portcullis

and postern and soared nearly fifty feet. Brightly clad women dotted the lower walkways, scurrying to and fro with baskets and children.

"Grimm?" Jillian croaked his name. Ruins? Her brow furrowed in consternation as she wondered how this could possibly be. Was it possible Grimm had misunderstood who lost that fateful battle years ago?

A huge banner with bold lettering rippled above the entrance to the castle. Jillian narrowed her eyes and squinted, much as she chided Zeke for doing, but she couldn't make out the words. "What does it say, Grimm?" she managed in a hushed whisper, awed by the unexpected vista of peace and prosperity stretching before her eyes.

For a long moment he didn't answer. She heard him swallow convulsively behind her, his body as rigid as the rocks Occam shifted his hooves upon.

"Do you think maybe some other clan took over this valley and rebuilt?" she offered faintly, latching on to any reason she could find to make sense of things.

He released a whistling breath, then punctuated it with a groan. "I doubt it, Jillian."

"It's possible, isn't it?" she insisted. If not, Grimm might genuinely suffer his da's madness, for only a madman could call this magnificent city a ruin.

"No."

"Why? I mean, how can you be certain from here? I can't even make out their plaids."

"Because that banner says 'Welcome home, son,' " he whispered with horror.

CHAPTER 28

"HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO MAKE SENSE OF THIS, GRIMM?" Jillian asked as the tense silence between them grew. He was staring blankly down at the valley. She felt suddenly and overwhelmingly confused.

"How are *you* supposed to make sense of it?" He slid from Occam's back and lowered her to the ground beside him. "You?" he echoed incredulously. He couldn't find one bit of sense in it either. Not only wasn't his home a ruin of ashes scattered across the valley floor as it was supposed to be, there were bloody welcome banners flapping from the turrets.

"Yes," she encouraged. "Me. You told me this place had been destroyed."

Grimm couldn't tear his eyes away from the vision in the valley. He was stupefied, any hope of logic derailed by shock. Tuluth was five times the size it had once been, the land tilled in neatly patterned sections, the homes twice as large. Weren't things supposed to seem smaller when one got bigger? His mind objected, with a growing sense of disorientation. He scanned the rocks behind him, seeking the hidden mouth of the cave to reassure himself that he was standing upon Wotan's Cleft and that it was indeed Tuluth below him. The river flowing through the valley was twice as wide, bluer than lapis—hell, even the mountain seemed to have grown.

Castle Maldebann was another matter. Had it changed colors? He recalled it as a towering monolith carved from blackest obsidian, all wicked forbidding angles, dripping moss and gargoyles. His gaze roved disbelievingly over the flowing lines of the pale gray, inviting structure. Fully occupied, cheerily functional, decorated—by God—with banners.

Banners that read "Welcome home."

Grimm sank to his knees, opened his eyes as wide as he could, closed and rubbed them, then opened them again. Jillian watched him curiously.

"It's still there, isn't it?" she said matter-of-factly. "I tried it too," she sympathized.

Grimm snatched a quick glance at her and was stunned to see a half-smile curving her lip. "Is there something amusing about this, lass?" he asked, unaccountably offended.

Instant compassion flooded her features. She laid a gentle hand on his arm. "Oh, no, Grimm. Don't think I'm laughing at you. I'm laughing at how stunned we both are, and partly with relief. I was expecting a dreadful scene. This is the last thing we expected to see. I know the shock must be doubly hard for you to absorb, but I was thinking it's funny because you look like I felt when you first came back to Caithness."

"How is that, lass?"

"Well, when I was little you seemed so big. I mean huge, monstrous, the biggest man in the world. And when you came back, since I was bigger, I expected you to finally look smaller. Not smaller than me, but at least smaller than you did the last time I'd seen you up close."

"And?" he encouraged.

She shook her head, bewildered. "You didn't. You looked bigger."

"And your point is?" He tore his gaze from the valley and peered at her.

"Well, you were expecting smaller, weren't you? I suspect it's probably much bigger. Shocking, isn't it?"

"I'm still waiting for your point, lass," he said dryly.

"I can see someone should have told you more fables when you were young," she teased. "My point is, memory can be a deceptive thing," she clarified.

"Perhaps the village never was completely destroyed. Perhaps it just seemed that way when you left. Did you leave at night? Was it too dark to see clearly?"

Grimm took her hands in his as they knelt together on the cliff's edge. It *had* been night when he'd left Tuluth, and the air had been thick with smoke. It had been a horrifying scene to the fourteen-year-old lad. He'd left believing his village and home destroyed and himself a dangerous beast. He'd left filled with hatred and despair, expecting little of life.

Now, fifteen years later, he crouched upon the same ridge, holding the hands of the woman he loved beyond life itself, gazing upon impossible sights. If Jillian hadn't been with him he might have tucked tail and run, never permitting himself to wonder what strange magic had been worked in this vale. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. "My memory of you was never deceptive. I always remembered you as the best that life had to offer."

Jillian's eyes widened. She tried to speak but ended up making a small choked sound instead. Grimm stiffened, interpreting her sound for a cry of discomfort. "Here I am, keeping you out in the cold when you're ill."

"That's not what... no," she stammered. "Truly, I feel much better now." When he eyed her suspiciously, she added, "Oooh, but I do need to get somewhere warm soon, Grimm. And that castle certainly looks warm." She eyed it hopefully.

Grimm's gaze darted back to the valley. The castle did look warm. And well fortified. Damn near the safest place he could take her, and why not? There were "welcome home" banners draped in dozens of locations. If the McKane were following him, what better place to stand and fight? How strange it was to return to Tuluth after all these years, with the McKane on his heels once again. Would the pattern finally come full circle and end? Perhaps they wouldn't need to go to Dalkeith to raise an army to fight the McKane after all.

But he'd have to face his da. He blew out a frustrated breath and weighed their options. How could he descend into this valley that cradled all his deepest fears? But how could he explain to Jillian if he turned and rode away? What if her illness returned? What if the McKane caught them? He was confounded by the onslaught of questions with no clear answers. Discovering Tuluth was this... this glorious place... it was too shocking for his mind to absorb.

Jillian winced and rubbed her stomach. His hands tightened on hers and he invoked his legendary willpower, aware that before this day was through he would need every ounce of it.

He had no choice. They swiftly remounted and began the descent.

* * * * *

"They're comin'!"

Ronin looked ready to bolt.

"Relax, man," Balder chided. "It's goin' to be fine, you'll see."

The McIlloch grimaced. "Easy for you to say. He's not your son. I tell you, he's goin' to spit in my face."

Balder shook his head and tried not to laugh. "If that's your worst concern, old man, you have nothin' to worry about."

* * * * *

Grimm and Jillian descended the back of Wotan's Cleft, circled around the base of it, and picked up the winding road into the mouth of the valley. Five huge mountains formed a natural fortress around the valley, rising like the gentle fingers of an unfurled hand. The city filled its protected palm, verdant, teeming with life. Jillian quickly concluded that when the McKane had attacked Tuluth years ago, they must have been either thoroughly arrogant or impossibly vast in numbers.

As if he'd read her mind, Grimm said, "We weren't always this great in numbers, Jillian. In the past fifteen years, Tuluth seems to have not only regained the men lost in the battle with the McKane, but increased by"—his dumbfounded gaze swept the valley—"nearly five times." He whistled, and shook his head "Someone has been rebuilding."

"Are you certain your da is insane?"

Grimm grimaced. "Yes." *As certain as I am of anything at the moment*, he appended silently.

"Well, for an insane man, he certainly seems to have done wonders here."

"I doona believe he has. Something else must be going on."

"And the 'Welcome back, son' banner? I thought you said you have no brothers."

"I doona," he replied stiffly. He realized they would soon be in clear sight of the first of those banners and he hadn't told Jillian the truth: that there was absolutely no mistaking who was expected because he hadn't been entirely truthful before—the dozens of banners hung throughout the city really read "Welcome back,

Gavrael."

Jillian squirmed, trying to get a better view. Despite his concerns, her lush hips wriggling against his loins sent a bolt of lust through his veins. Memories of last night teased the periphery of his mind, but he could afford no distractions. "Be still," he growled.

"I just want to see."

"You're going to be seeing the sky from your back if you keep wiggling like that, lass." He tugged her against him so she could feel what her squirming had accomplished. He'd love nothing more than to lose himself in the passion of Jillian and, when she was sleepily sated, spirit her miles in the other direction.

They had come within reading distance of the banners when Jillian leaned forward again. Grimm swallowed and braced himself for the questions he knew would follow.

"Why, it's not about you at all, Grimm," she said wonderingly. "This banner doesn't say 'Welcome home, son.' It says 'Welcome home, Gavrael.' " She paused, nibbling her lip. "Who's Gavrael? And how could you manage to read it from so far away yet mistake the word 'son' for 'Gavrael'? The words don't look anything alike."

"Must you be so logical?" he said with a sigh. He reconsidered turning Occam about and tearing off in the other direction without offering an explanation, but he knew it would be only a temporary reprieve. Ultimately, Jillian would bring him back, one way or another.

It was time to face his demons—apparently, all of them at the same time. For winding down the road toward him was a parade of people, replete with a band of pipes and drums, and—if his memory could be trusted on anything at all—the one in front bore a marked resemblance to his da. And so did the man who rode beside him. Grimm's gaze darted back and forth between them, searching for some clue that might tell him which one was his father.

Suddenly a worse realization struck him, one which, stunned to temporary senselessness by the condition of his home, he'd managed to overlook entirely. The moment he'd glimpsed the thriving Tuluth, the shock of it all had caused his

deepest fear to recede deceptively to the back of his mind. Now it returned with the force of a tidal wave, flooding him with quiet desperation.

If his memory could be trusted—and that did seem to be the question of the day—familiar faces were approaching, which meant some of the people riding toward them knew he was a Berserker.

In an instant, they could betray his terrible secret to Jillian, and he would lose her forever.

CHAPTER 29

GRIMM DREW OCCAM TO SUCH AN ABRUPT HALT THAT the stallion spooked and reared. Mustering the most soothing sounds he could manage in his agitated condition, Grimm calmed the startled gray and slipped from its back.

"What are you doing?" Jillian was bewildered by his rapid dismount.

Grimm studied the ground intently. "I need you to remain here, lass. Come forward when I beckon, but no sooner. Promise me you'll wait until I summon you."

Jillian studied his bent head. After a brief internal debate, she reached out and caressed his dark hair. He turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm.

"I haven't seen these people in fifteen years, Jillian."

"I'll stay, I promise."

He gave her a wordless thank-you with his eyes. He was torn by conflicting emotions, yet he knew he had to approach alone. Only when he had wrung an oath from the villagers to protect his secret would he lead Jillian into the city and address her comfort. Had she been dangerously ill, he would have risked losing her love to save her life, but she was hardly incapacitated, and although he regretted any discomfort she might suffer he was not willing to face the fear and revulsion he'd glimpsed in his dreams. He couldn't afford to take any chances.

Satisfied that she would wait at this distance until he summoned her, Grimm turned and sprinted down the dirt road toward the approaching melee. His heart seemed to have lodged in the vicinity of his throat, and he felt as if he were being wrenched in two. Behind him was the woman he loved; in front of him was the past he'd vowed never to confront by light of day.

At the forefront of the cluster rode two men of equal height and girth, both with thick shocks of black hair, liberally threaded with silver. Both had strong, craggy faces and clefts in their proud chins, both had a similar expression of joy on their features. What was going on here? Grimm wondered.

It was as if everything he'd ever believed had been a lie. Tuluth had been

destroyed, but Tuluth was a thriving city. His da had been insane, but someone with a stable mind and a strong back had rebuilt this land. His da seemed extraordinarily happy to see him, and though Grimm had not intended to return, his father apparently had been expecting him. How? Why? Thousands of questions flashed through his mind in the short time it took him to span the distance between them.

The parade of people began roaring as he drew near, their faces wreathed in smiles. How was a man expected to walk into such an exuberant crowd with hatred in his heart?

And why were they so damned happy to see him?

He stopped his sprint a dozen feet from the front line. Unable to hold still, he resorted to jogging in place, breathing harshly, not from the run but from the dreaded encounter to come.

The two men who looked so similar broke away from the crowd. One of them raised a hand to the entourage and the crowd fell silent, maintaining a respectful distance as they rode forward. Grimm sneaked a glance over his shoulder to make certain Jillian hadn't followed him. With relief he saw she had obeyed his command, although if she leaned any farther over Occam's head toward the crowd he'd have to peel her from the road.

"Gavrael."

The deep voice so like his own whipped his head around. He stared up at the two men, uncertain which one had spoken.

"Grimm," he corrected instantly.

The man on the right erupted into an immediate bluster. "What the bletherin' hell kind of name is Grim? Why not be namin' yourself Depressed, or Melancholy? Nay, I have it—Woebegone." He cast a disgusted glance at Grimm and snorted.

"It's better than McIlloch," Grimm said stiffly. "And it's not Grim with one *m*. It's Grimm with two."

"Well, why would you be changin' your name at all, lad?" The man on the left did little to disguise his wounded expression.

Grimm searched their faces, trying desperately to decide which one was his father. He didn't have the faintest clue what he might do when he figured it out, but he'd really like to know which one to treat to the venom he'd been storing for years uncounted. No, not uncounted, he corrected himself—fifteen years of angry words he wanted to fling at the man, words that had festered for half his lifetime.

"Who are you?" he demanded of the man who'd most recently spoken.

The man turned to his companion with a mournful look. "Who am I, he's asking me, Balder. Can you be believin' that? Who am I?"

"At least he dinna spit," Balder said mildly.

"You're Ronin," Grimm accused. If the one was named Balder, the other had to be his da, Ronin McIlloch.

"I'm not Ronin to you," the man exclaimed indignantly. "I'm your da."

"You're no father to me," Grimm remarked in a voice so chill it vied with the bitterest Highland wind.

Ronin gazed accusingly at Balder. "I told you so."

Balder shook his head, arching a bushy brow. "He still dinna spit."

"What the hell does spitting have to do with anything?"

"Well, lad," Balder drawled, "that's the excuse I'm lookin' for to tie your spiteful arse up and drag you back to the castle, where I can be poundin' some good common sense and respect for your elders into you."

"You think you could?" Grimm challenged coolly. His dangerous mix of emotions clamored lustily for a fight.

Balder laughed, the sound a joyous shout rumbling from his thick chest. "I love a good fight, lad, but a man like me could eat a pup like you in one snap of his jaws."

Grimm leveled a dark look at Ronin. "Does he know what I am?" Arrogance underscored the question.

"Do you know what *I* am?" Balder countered softly.

Grimm's eyes swept back to his face. "What do you mean?" he asked so quickly it came out sounding like one word. He studied Balder intently. Mocking ice-blue eyes met his levelly. *Impossible!* In all his years, he'd never encountered another Berserker!

Balder shook his head and sighed. He exchanged glances with Ronin. "The lad is dense, Ronin. I'm tellin' you, he's thick through and through."

Ronin puffed himself up indignantly. "He is not. He's my son."

"The lad doesn't know the first thing about himself, even after all these—"

"Well, how could he, bein' that—"

"And any dolt should have figured—"

"That doesn't mean he's dense—"

"Haud yer wheesht!" Grimm roared.

"There's no need to be roarin' my head off, boy," Balder rebuked. "It's not as if you're the only one with a Berserker's temper here."

"I am not a boy. I am not a lad. I am not a dolt," Grimm said evenly, determined to take control of the erratic conversation. There would be time later to discover how Balder had become a Berserker. "And when the woman who is behind me approaches, you will kindly make it clear to the servants, the villagers, and the entire clan that I am *not* a Berserker, do you understand me?"

"Not a Berserker?" Balder's eyebrows rose.

"Not a Berserker?" Ronin's brow furrowed.

"Not a Berserker."

"But you *are*" Ronin argued obtusely.

Grimm glared at Ronin. "But she doesn't know that. And if she discovers it, she'll leave me. And if she leaves me, I'll have no choice but to kill you both," Grimm said matter-of-factly.

"Well," Balder huffed, deeply offended. "There's no need to be gettin' nasty about things, lad. I'm sure we'll find a way to sort things out."

"I doubt it, Balder. And if you call me lad one more time, you're going to have a problem. I'll spit, and give you the reason you've been looking for, and we'll just see if an aging Berserker can take one in his prime."

"Two agin' Berserkers," Ronin corrected proudly.

Grimm's head snapped around, and he stared at Ronin. Identical ice-blue eyes. The day kept dishing out one bewildering revelation after another. He found sanctuary in sarcasm: "What the hell is this, the valley of the Berserkers?"

"Somethin' like that, Gavrael," Balder muttered, dodging a nudge from Ronin.

"My name is *Grimm*"

"How do you plan to be explainin' the name on the banners to your wife?" Ronin asked.

"She's not my wife," Grimm evaded. He hadn't figured that out yet.

"What?" Outraged, Ronin nearly rose to his feet in the stirrups. "You've brought a woman here in dishonor? No son of mine cavorts with his mate without offerin' her the proper union."

Grimm buried his hands in his hair. His world had gone mad. This was the most absurd conversation he could recall holding. "I haven't had the *time* to marry her yet! I only recently abducted her—"

"Abducted her?" Ronin's nostrils flared.

"With her consent!" Grimm said defensively.

"I thought there was a wedding at Caithness," Ronin argued.

"There nearly was, but not to me. And there will be one as soon as I can. Lack of time is the only reason she's not my wife. And you"—he pointed furiously at Ronin—"you haven't been a father to me for fifteen years, so doona think you can start acting like one now."

"I haven't been a father to you because you wouldn't come home!"

"You know why I wouldn't come home." Grimm spoke furiously, his eyes blazing.

Ronin flinched. He drew a deep breath, and when he spoke again he seemed deflated by Grimm's anger. "I know I failed you," he said, his eyes brimful of regret.

"Failed me is putting it lightly," Grimm muttered. He was badly thrown off balance by his da's response. He'd expected the old man to rage right back, maybe attack him like the batty bastard he was. But there was genuine regret in his gaze. How was he supposed to deal with that? If Ronin had raged back, he could have released his pent-up anger by fighting with him. But Ronin didn't. He simply sat his horse and gazed sadly down at him, and it made Grimm feel even worse.

"Jillian is ill," Grimm said gruffly. "She needs a warm place to stay."

"She's ill?" Balder trumpeted. "By Odin's spear, lad, did you have to wait until now to say the most important thing?"

"Lad?" The way Grimm uttered the single word made his threat clear.

But Balder was unruffled. His mouth twisted with a sneer. "Listen up, son of the McIlloch, you doona frighten me. I'm far too old to be put off by a young pup's growl. You won't let me call you by your God-given name, and I refuse to call you that ridiculous appellation you've chosen, so it's either goin' to be 'lad' or it's goin' to be 'arsehole.' Which do you prefer?" The older man's grin was menacing.

Grimm caught himself on the verge of a faint smile. If he hadn't been so hell-bent on hating this place, he would have liked blustering old Balder. The man commanded respect and clearly took guff from no one.

"You can call me lad on one condition," he relented. "Take care of my woman and keep my secret. And make sure the villagers do the same."

Ronin and Balder exchanged glances and sighed. "Done."

"Welcome home, lad," Balder added.

Grimm rolled his eyes.

"Aye, welcome—" Ronin began, but Grimm raised a warning finger.

"And you, old man," he said to Ronin. "If I were you, I'd be giving me a lot of breathing room," he warned.

Ronin opened his mouth, then closed it, his blue eyes dark with pain.



CHAPTER 30

JILLIAN COULDN'T STOP AMILING. IT WAS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE not to in the midst of such excitement. How Grimm managed to continue looking so somber was beyond her comprehension.

She spared a glance at him, which she nearly begrudged because everywhere else she looked she found something enchanting and Grimm looked so miserable it depressed her. She knew she should feel more compassion for his plight, but it was difficult to feel empathy when his family was so overjoyed to welcome him back into the fold. And what a magnificent fold it was.

Gavrael, she corrected herself silently. Rather than motioning her to join them after he'd greeted his da, he'd sprinted back to get her so they could ride in together. Surrounded by the cheering crowd, he'd explained to her that when he'd left Tuluth years ago he'd assumed a new name. His real name, although he insisted she continue calling him Grimm, was Gavrael Roderick Icarus McIlloch.

She sighed dreamily. Jillian Alanna McIlloch; said aloud it was a tumble of /'s that rolled euphonically. She had no doubt that Grimm would marry her once they'd settled in.

Grimm tightened his grip on her hand and whispered her name to get her attention. "Jillian, come back from wherever you are. Balder's going to show us to our chambers, and we'll get you warm and fed."

"Oh, I feel much better, Grimm," she said absently, marveling over a beautiful sculpture that adorned the hall. She trundled after Balder and an assortment of maids happily holding Grimm's hand. "This castle is enormous, breathtaking. How could you have ever thought it was dark and dreary?"

He gave her a glum look. "I haven't a blethering clue," he muttered.

"Here's your room, Gavrael—" Balder began.

"Grimm."

"Lad." Balder stared him down levelly. "And Merry here will see Jillian to hers,"

he said pointedly.

"What?" Grimm was momentarily dumbfounded. Now that she was his, how could he sleep without Jillian in his arms?

"Room." Balder gestured impatiently. "Yours." He turned abruptly to a dainty maid. "And Merry here will show Jillian to *hers*." His blue eyes reflected a cool challenge.

"I will see Jillian to hers myself," Grimm begrudged after a tense pause.

"As long as you see yourself right back out of it, lad, go on ahead. But you're not married, so doona be thinkin' you can act like you are."

Jillian flushed.

"No reflection on you, lass," Balder hastened to assure her. "I can see you're a fine lady, but this boy is randy as a goat around you and it's plain to see. If he seeks the joys of wedded bliss, he can wed you. Without a weddin' he'll be havin' no bliss."

Grimm flushed. "Enough, Balder."

Balder arched a brow and frowned. "And try to be a bit nicer to your da, lad. The man did give you life, after all." With that he turned and blustered down the hall, his proud chin jutting like the prow of a ship breaking waves.

Grimm waited until he had disappeared from sight, then sought directions from the maid. "I'll escort Jillian to her chambers," he informed the elfin-looking Merry. To the cluster of maids he said, "See to it that we have a steaming tub and"—he glanced at Jillian worriedly—"what kind of food might your stomach tolerate, lass?"

Anything and everything, Jillian thought. She was famished. "Lots," she said succinctly.

Grimm smiled faintly, finished giving the maids instructions, and escorted Jillian to her rooms.

As they entered the rooms, Jillian exhaled a sigh of pleasure. Her chambers were every bit as luxuriously appointed as the rest of Maldebann. Four tall windows

graced the west wall of the bedroom, and from there she could watch the sun set over the mountains. Snowy lambskin rugs covered the floors. The bed was carved of burnished cherry that had been polished to a vibrant luster and canopied with sheer white linen. A cheery fire burned in an enormous fireplace.

"How are you feeling, Jillian?" Grimm shut the door and drew her into his arms.

"I'm much better now," she assured him.

"I know this must all be quite shocking—"

Jillian kissed him, silencing further words. He seemed startled by the gesture, then kissed her back so urgently it caused her toes to curl with anticipation. She clung to the kiss, spinning it out as long as she could, trying to imbue him with courage and love, for she suspected he'd be needing it. Then she forgot her noble intentions as desire sizzled between them.

A sharp rap on the door dampened it quickly.

Grimm pulled back and stalked to the door, unsurprised to find Balder standing there. "I forgot to tell you, lad, we have supper at eight," Balder said, peering beyond him at Jillian. "Has he been kissin' you, lass? You just tell me and I'll take care of it."

Grimm closed the door without replying, and locked it. Balder sighed so loudly outside the door that Jillian nearly laughed.

As Grimm walked back to her side, she studied him. The strain of the day was evident; even his usual proud posture seemed bowed. When she considered all the man had been through in the past few hours, she felt terrible. He was busy tending to her when he could probably use nothing more greatly than some time alone to sort through all the shocks the day had delivered. She brushed his cheek with her hand. "Grimm, if you don't mind, do you think I could rest a bit before I meet any more people? Perhaps I could take dinner in my room tonight and face the castle tomorrow?"

She hadn't been wrong. His expression was a mixture of concern and relief.

"Are you certain you doona mind being on your own? Are you certain you're well enough?"

"Grimm, I feel wonderful. Whatever was wrong with me this morning has passed. Now I'd just like to relax, soak in a long bath, and sleep. I suspect you probably have people and places you'd like to reacquaint yourself with."

"You're remarkable, do you know that, lass?" He smoothed her hair and tucked a stray tendril behind her ear.

"I love you, Grimm Roderick," she said intensely. "Go meet your people and see your home. Take your time. I will always be here for you."

"What did I do to deserve you?" The words exploded from him.

She brushed her lips against his lightly. "I ask myself the same question all the time."

"I want to see you tonight, Jillian. I need to see you."

"I'll leave my door unlocked." She flashed him a dazzling smile that promised the moon and the stars when he came.

He gave her one last tender look and left.

* * * * *

"Go to him. I can't," Ronin said urgently.

The two men peered out the window at Grimm, sprawled on the wall in front of the castle, gazing out over the village. Night had fallen, and tiny lights in the village twinkled like a reflection of the stars that dotted the sky. The castle had been constructed to provide an unimpeded view of the village. A wide stone terrace lined the perimeter, east and west. It sloped in tiers down to the fortifying walls, the terrace itself surrounded by a low wall at such a height that from atop it one could look straight out over the valley. Grimm had been sitting alone on the wall for hours, alternating his gaze between the castle behind him and the valley before him.

"What would you like me to be sayin'?" Balder grunted.

"He's your son, Ronin. You're goin' to have to speak with him at some point."

"He hates me."

"So speak with him and try to help him get past it."

"It's not that easy!" Ronin snapped, but in his blue eyes Balder saw fear. Fear that if Ronin spoke with his son, he might lose him all over again.

Balder eyed his brother for a moment and then sighed. "I'll try, Ronin."

* * * * *

Grimm watched the valley batten down for the night. The villagers had begun to light candles and pull shutters, and from his perch on the low wall he could hear the faint strains of parents calling their children into cozy cottages and farmers rounding up animals before venturing to bed themselves. It was a scene of peace and harmony. He stole an occasional glance over his shoulder at the castle, but not one gargoyle lurked. It was possible, he conceded, that at fourteen he'd been fanciful. It was possible that years of running and hiding had colored his perceptions until all seemed desolate and barren, even a past that had once been bright. His life had changed so abruptly on that fateful day, it might well have skewed his memories.

He could accept that he'd forgotten what Tuluth was really like. He could accept that the castle had never been truly menacing. But what was he to make of his da? He'd seen him with his own eyes, crouched over his mother's body. Had he, in his shock and grief, misconstrued that event too? Once the possibility presented itself, he studied it from every angle, his confusion deepening.

He'd found his da in the south gardens in the early morning, the time Jolyn strolled the grounds and greeted the day. He'd been on his way to meet Arron to go fishing. The scene was painstakingly etched on his mind: Jolyn beaten and battered, her face a mass of bruises, Ronin crouched above her, snarling, blood everywhere, and that damned incriminating knife in his hand.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Balder interrupted his internal debate.

"Aye," Grimm replied, mildly surprised Balder had joined him. "I doona remember it like this, Balder."

Balder placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "That's because it wasn't always like this. Tuluth has grown tremendously over the years, thanks to your da's efforts."

"Come to think of it, I doona remember you either," Grimm said thoughtfully.
"Did I know you when I was a lad?"

"No. I've spent most of my life wanderin'. I visited Maldebann twice when you were young, but only briefly. Six months ago the ship I was sailin' broke up in a storm, washin' me ashore old Alba. I figured that meant it was time to check on what remained of my clan. I'm your da's older brother, but I had a fancy to see the world, so I bullied Ronin into bein' laird, and a fine one he's made."

Grimm scowled. "That's debatable."

"Doona be so hard on Ronin, lad. He's wanted nothin' more than for you to come home. Maybe your memories of him are as discolored as your memories of Tuluth."

"Maybe," Grimm allowed tightly. "But maybe not."

"Give him a chance, that's all I'm askin'. Get to know him again and make a fresh judgment. There were things he dinna have time to explain to you before. Let him tell you now."

Grimm shrugged his hand off his shoulder. "Enough, Balder. Leave me alone."

"Promise me you'll give him a chance to talk to you, lad," Balder persisted, undaunted by Grimm's dismissal.

"I haven't left yet, have I?"

Balder inclined his head and retreated.

* * * * *

"Well, that dinna last long," Ronin complained.

"I said my piece. Now do your part," Balder grumbled.

"Tomorrow." Ronin procrastinated.

Balder glared.

"You know it's foolish to try talkin' about things when people are tired, and the lad must be exhausted, Balder."

"Berserkers only get tired when they've been in a rage," Balder said dryly.

"Quit actin' like my older brother," Ronin snapped.

"Well, quit actin' like my younger brother." Two pairs of ice-blue eyes battled, and Balder finally shrugged. "If you won't face that problem, then turn your mind to this one. Merry overheard Jillian tellin' the lad she'd leave her door unlocked. If we doona come up with somethin', that lad o' yours will be samplin' the pleasures without payin' the price."

"But he already has sampled them. We know that."

"That doesn't make it right. And bein' denied may encourage him to wed her all the sooner," Balder pointed out.

"What do you suggest? Lock her in the tower? The boy's a Berserker, he'll get past anythin'."

Balder thought a moment, then grinned. "He won't be gettin' past righteous indignation, will he, now?"

* * * * *

The hour was past midnight when Grimm hastened down the corridor to Jillian's chambers. Merry had assured him that Jillian passed a restful evening with no further bouts of illness. She'd eaten like a woman famished, the elfin maid had said.

He let his lips curve in the full smile he felt whenever he thought of Jillian. He needed to touch her, to tell her that he wanted to marry her if she would still have him. He longed to confide in her. She had a logical mind; perhaps she could help him see things he couldn't make sense of by dint of being too near the subjects involved. He stood firm on his position that she must never know what he really was, but he could talk with her about much of what had happened—or *seemed* to have happened—fifteen years ago, without betraying his secret. His gait quickened as he turned down the hall leading to her chambers, and he nearly sprinted around the corner.

He halted abruptly when he spotted Balder, energetically plastering a crack in the stone with a mixture of clay and crushed stone.

"What are you doing here?" Grimm scowled indignantly. "It's the middle of the night."

Balder shrugged innocently. "Tendin' this castle is a full-time job. Fortunately, I doona require much sleep anymore. But come to think of it, what are you doin' here? Your rooms are that way"—he leveled a half-full trowel in the other direction—"in case you've forgotten. You wouldn't be lookin' to spoil an innocent young lass, now, would you?"

A muscle twitched in Grimm's jaw. "Right. I must have gotten turned around."

"Well, turn back around, lad. I expect I'll be workin' on this wall all night," Balder said evenly. "The *whole* night."

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, Jillian poked her head out the door. "Balder!" She tugged her wrapper about her shoulders, peering at him peevishly.

Balder grinned. She was lovely, flushed with sleep and obviously intent upon sneaking to Grimm's room.

"Do you need somethin', lass?"

"What on earth are you doing?"

He gave her the same lame excuse he'd given Grimm and plastered heartily away.

"Oh," Jillian said in a small voice.

"Do you wish me to escort you to the kitchens, lass? Can I give you a wee tour? I'm usually up all night, and the only thing I plan to do is plaster here. Wee cracks between the stones can become great cracks in the blink of an eye if left untended."

"No, no." Jillian waved him away. "I just heard a noise and wondered what it was." She bid him good night and retreated.

After she'd closed the door, Balder rubbed his eyes. By the saints, it was going to be a bloody long night.

* * * * *

High above Tuluth, men gathered. Two of them broke away from the main group and moved toward the bluff, talking quietly.

"The ambush didn't work, Connor. Why the hell did you send a mere score of men after a Berserker?"

"Because you said he was probably on his way back to Tuluth," Connor shot back. "We dinna wish to waste too many that we might be needing later. Besides, how many kegs of our black powder did you waste, only to be failing, yourself?"

Ramsay Logan scowled. "I hadn't thought it through as well as I should have. He won't escape the next time."

"Logan, if you kill Gavrael McIlloch there will be gold enough to last you the rest of your days. We've been trying for years. He's the last one left that can breed. That we know of," he added.

"Are all their children born Berserkers?" Ramsay watched the lights flicker and fade in the valley.

Connor's lip curled in disgust. "Only the sons of direct descent from the laird. The curse confines itself to the primary, paternal line. Over the centuries our clan has gathered as much information about the McIlloch as we could. We know they have only one true mate, and once their mate dies they remain celibate for the duration of their years. So the old man is no longer a threat. To the best of our knowledge, Gavrael is his only son. When he dies, that's the end. However, during various times over the centuries they've managed to hide a few from us. That's why it's imperative that you get inside Castle Maldebann. I want the last McIlloch destroyed."

"Do you suspect the castle is crawling with concealed blue-eyed boys? Is it possible Ronin had other sons besides Gavrael?"

"We don't know," Connor admitted. "Over the years we've heard there is a hall, a place of pagan worship to Odin. It's supposed to be right in the heart of the mountain." His face grew taut with fury. "Damned heathens, it's a Christian land now! We've heard they practice pagan ceremonies there. And one of the maids we captured—before she died—said that they record each and every one of their unholy spawn in that hall. You must find it and verify Gavrael is the last."

"You expect me to slip into the lair of such creatures and spy? How much gold did you say was in this for me?" Ramsay bargained shrewdly.

Connor regarded him with the fanaticism of a purist. "If you prove he's the last and succeed in killing him, you can name your price."

"I'll get into the castle and take the last Berserker down," Ramsay said with relish.

"How? You've failed three times now."

"Don't worry. I'll not only get to the hall, I will take his mate, Jillian. It's possible she's pregnant—"

"By Christ's blessed tears!" Connor shuddered with disgust. "After you use her, kill her," he ordered.

Ramsay raised a hand. "No. We will wait to see if she's pregnant."

"But she's been tainted—"

"I want her. She's part of my price," Ramsay insisted. "If she's carrying his child, I'll keep her under close guard until she gives birth."

"If it's a son you kill it, and I'll be there to watch. You say you hate the Berserkers, but if you thought you could breed them into your clan, you might feel differently."

"Gavrael McIlloch killed my brothers," Ramsay said tightly. "Religion or not, I'll suffer no qualms about killing his son. Or daughter."

"Good." Connor McKane looked down into the valley at the sleeping village of Tuluth. "The city is much larger now, Logan. What's your plan?"

"You mentioned there are caves in the mountain. Once I've captured the woman I'll give you a piece of the clothing she's wearing. You'll take it and confront the old man and Gavrael. They won't fight as long as they know I have Jillian. You'll send him to the caves, and I'll take care of it from there."

"How?"

"I said I will take care of it from there," Ramsay growled.

"I want to see his dead body with my own eyes."

"You will." Ramsay joined Connor behind the shelter of a bluff. The two of them stared down at Castle Maldebann.

"Such a waste of beauty and strength on heathens. When they are defeated the McKane will take Maldebann," Connor breathed.

"When I have done as I promised, the *Logan* take Maldebann," Ramsay said with an icy gaze that dared Connor to disagree.



CHAPTER 31

WHEN JILLIAN AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING, SHE immediately became aware of two things: She missed Grimm terribly, and she had what women called "breeding woes." As she curled on her side and cradled her stomach, she couldn't believe she had failed to recognize her malady the previous morning. Although she'd suspected she was pregnant, she must have been so distracted by worries of how she would maneuver Grimm to Maldebann that she hadn't pieced the facts together and realized she had the morning nausea the maids at Caithness had often complained of. The thought of suffering it every morning depressed her, but the confirmation that she was carrying Grimm's child replaced her discomfort with elation. She couldn't wait to share the wonderful news with him.

A sudden alarming ache in her stomach nearly made her reevaluate her joy. She indulged herself in a loud, self-pitying groan. Curling into a ball helped, as did the consolation that from what she'd heard, such illness was usually of brief duration.

And it was. After about thirty minutes it passed as suddenly as it had assaulted her. She was surprised to discover she felt hearty and hale, as if she'd not suffered a moment of queasiness. She brushed her long hair, tied it back in a ribbon, then sat gazing sadly at the ruins of her wedding gown. They'd left Caithness with nothing but the dress on her body. The only items of clothing in her chambers were that and the Douglas plaid that Grimm had bundled around her. Well, she wasn't going to be denied breakfast by a lack of clothing, she decided swiftly. Not when her tummy was so temperamental.

A few moments and a few strategic knots later, she was wrapped Scots-style in a plaid and ready to make her way to the Greathall.

* * * * *

Ronin, Balder, and Grimm were already at breakfast, eating in strained silence. Jillian chirped a cheery good morning; the morose group clearly needed a stiff dose of gaiety.

The three men leapt to their feet, jostling for the honor of seating her. She bestowed it upon Grimm with a bright smile. "Good morning," she purred, her eyes wandering over him hungrily. She wondered if her newfound knowledge of

their child growing within her glittered in her eyes. She simply *had to* get him alone soon!

He froze, her chair half pulled out. "Morning," he whispered huskily, stupidly, dazzled by her radiance. "Och, Jillian, you have no other clothes, do you?" He eyed her clad in his plaid and smiled tenderly. "I recall you dressing like this when you were wee. You were determined to be just like your da." He seated her, his hands lingering on her shoulders. "Balder, can you set the maids to finding something Jillian might wear?"

It was Ronin who replied. "I'm certain some of Jolyn's gowns could be altered. I had them sealed away..." His eyes clouded with sorrow.

Jillian was astonished when Grimm's jaw tensed. He dropped into his seat and fisted his hand around his mug so tightly, his knuckles whitened. Although Grimm had told her a few things about his family, he'd not told her how Jolyn had died. Nor had he told her what Ronin had done to carve such a chasm between the two of them. From what she'd seen of his da, there was nothing remotely strange or mad about him. He seemed a gentle man, filled with regrets and longing for a better future with his son. She realized Balder was watching Grimm as intently as she was.

"Did you ever hear the fable of the wolf in sheep's clothing, lad?" Balder asked, eyeing Grimm with displeasure.

"Aye," he growled. "I became well acquainted with that moral at an early age." Again he flashed a look of fury at Ronin.

"Then you should be understandin' sometimes it works in reverse—there's such a thing as a sheep in wolf's clothing too. Sometimes appearances can be misleadin'. Sometimes you have to reexamine the facts with mature eyes."

Jillian eyed them curiously. There was a message being conveyed that she didn't understand.

"Jillian loves fables," Grimm muttered, urging the subject in a new direction.

"Well, tell us one, lass," Ronin encouraged.

Jillian blushed. "No, really, I couldn't. It's the children who love fables so much."

"Bah, children, she says, Balder!" Ronin exclaimed. "My Jolyn loved fables and told us them often. Come on, lass, give us a story."

"Well..." she demurred.

"Tell us one. Go on," the brothers urged.

Beside her Grimm took a deep swallow from his mug and slammed it down on the table.

Jillian flinched inwardly but refused to react. He'd been stomping and glowering ever since they'd arrived, and she couldn't fathom why. Seeking a way to lessen the palpable tension, she rummaged through her stock of fables and, struck by an impish impulse, selected a tale.

"Once there was a mighty lion, heroic and invincible. He was king of the beasts, and he knew it well. A bit arrogant, one might say, but a good king just the same." She paused to smile warmly at Grimm.

He scowled.

"This mighty lion was walking in the forest of the lowlands one evening when he spied a lovely woman—"

"With waves of golden hair and amber eyes," Balder interjected.

"Why, yes! How did you know? You've heard this one, haven't you, Balder?"

Grimm rolled his eyes.

Jillian stifled an urge to laugh and continued. "The mighty lion was mesmerized by her beauty, by her gentle ways, and by the lovely song she was singing. He padded forward quietly so he wouldn't startle her. But the maiden wasn't frightened—she saw the lion for what he was: a powerful, courageous, and honorable creature with an often-fearsome roar who possessed a pure, fearless heart. His arrogance she could overlook, because she knew from watching her own father that arrogance was often part and parcel of extraordinary strength." Jillian sneaked a quick glance at Ronin; he was grinning broadly.

Drawing succor from Ronin's amusement, she looked directly at Grimm and continued. "The lion was besotted. The next day he sought out the woman's

father and pledged his heart, seeking her hand in marriage. The woman's father was concerned about the lion's beastly nature, despite the fact that his daughter was perfectly comfortable with it. Unknown to the daughter, her father agreed to accept the lion's courtship, provided the lion king allowed him to pluck his claws and pull his teeth, rendering him tame and civilized. The lion was hopelessly in love. He agreed, and so it was done."

"Another Samson and Delilah," Grimm muttered.

Jillian ignored him. "When the lion then pressed his case, the father drove him from his home with sticks and stones, because the beast was no longer a threat, no longer a fearsome creature."

Jillian paused significantly, and Balder and Ronin clapped their hands. "Wonderfully told!" Ronin exclaimed. "That was a favorite of my wife's as well."

Grimm scowled. "That's the end? Just what the hell was the point of that story?" he asked, offended. "That loving makes a man weaker? That he loses the woman he loves when she sees him unmanned?"

Ronin gave him a disparaging glance. "No, lad. The point of that fable is that even the mighty can be humbled by love."

"Wait—there's more. The daughter," Jillian said quietly, "moved by his willingness to trust so completely, fled her da's house and wed her lion king." She understood Grimm's fear now. Whatever secret he was hiding, he was afraid that once she discovered it, she would leave him.

"I still think it's a terrible story!" Grimm thundered, waving his hand angrily. It caught his mug and sent it flying across the table, spraying Ronin with cider wine. Grimm stared at the bright red stain spreading on his da's white linen for a long, strained moment. "Excuse me," he said roughly, pushing his chair back and without another glance loping from the room.

"Ah, lass, he can be a handful sometimes, I fear," Ronin said with an apologetic look, mopping at his shirt with a cloth.

Jillian poked at her breakfast. "I wish I understood what was going on." She shot a hopeful glance at the brothers.

"You haven't asked him, have you?" Balder remarked.

"I want to ask him, but..."

"But you understand he may not be able to give you answers because he doesn't seem to have them himself, does he?"

"I just wish he'd talk to me about it! If not to me, then at least to *you*," she said to Ronin. "There's so much pent up inside him, and I have no idea what to do but give him time."

"He loves you, lass," Ronin assured her. "It's in his eyes, in the way he touches you, in the way he moves when you're around. You're the center of his heart."

"I know," she said simply. "I don't doubt that he loves me. But trust is part and parcel of love."

Balder turned a piercing gaze on his brother. "Ronin is going to speak with him today, aren't you, brother?" He rose from the table. "I'll get you a fresh shirt," he added, and left the Greathall.

Ronin removed his cider-soaked shirt, draped it over a chair, and mopped his body with a linen cloth. The cider had doused him thoroughly.

Jillian watched him curiously. His torso was well defined and powerful. His chest was broad, darkened by years of Highland sun and dusted with hair like Grimm's. And like Grimm's, it was free of scars or birthmarks, a vast unblemished expanse of olive-tinted skin. She couldn't help herself; she stared, perplexed by the fact that there was not a single scar on the torso of a man who'd allegedly fought dozens of battles while wearing no more protection than his plaid, if he fought in the usual Scots manner. Even her father had a scar or two on his chest. She stared uncomprehendingly until she realized Ronin wasn't moving, but was watching her watch him.

"The last time a pretty lass looked at my chest was over fifteen years ago," he teased.

Jillian's gaze flew to his face. He was regarding her tenderly. "Was that how long ago your wife died?"

Ronin nodded. "Jolyn was the loveliest woman I've ever seen. And a truer heart I've never known."

"How did you lose her?" she asked gently.

Ronin regarded her impassively.

"Was it in the battle?" she persisted.

Ronin studied his shirt. "I fear this shirt's ruined."

She tried another route, one he might be willing to discuss. "But surely in fifteen years you've met other women, haven't you?"

"There's only one for us, lass. And after she's gone there can never be another."

"You mean you've never been with... in fifteen years you've—" She broke off, embarrassed by the direction the conversation was taking, but she couldn't suppress her curiosity. She knew men often remarried after their wives died. If they didn't, it was considered natural that they took mistresses. Was this man saying he'd been utterly alone for fifteen years?

"There's only one in here." Ronin thumped a fist against his chest. "We only love once, and we're no good to a woman without love," he said with quiet dignity. "My son knows that, at least."

Jillian's eyes fixed on his chest again, and she remarked upon the cause of her consternation. "Grimm said the McKane split your chest open with a battle-ax."

Ronin's eyes darted away. "I heal well. And it's been fifteen years, lass." He shrugged, as if that should explain all.

Jillian stepped closer and stretched out a wondering hand.

Ronin moved away. "The sun darkenin' my skin covers a lot of scars. And there's the hair as well," he said quickly.

Too quickly, for Jillian's peace of mind. "But I don't even see the *hint* of a scar," she protested. According to Grimm, the ax had been buried to the thick wedge of the hilt. Not only couldn't most men survive that, such an injury would have left a thick ridge of hard white tissue. "Grimm said you'd been in many battles. One

would think you'd have at least one or two scars to show. Come to think of it," she wondered aloud, "Grimm doesn't have any scars either. Anywhere. As a matter of fact, I don't think I have ever even seen a small cut on that man. Does he never hurt himself? Slip while shaving that stubborn jaw? Stub his toe? Tear a hangnail?" She knew her voice was rising but couldn't help it.

"We McIlloch enjoy excellent health." Ronin fidgeted with his tartan, unrolled a fold, and draped it across his chest.

"Apparently," Jillian responded, her mind far away. She forced herself back with an effort. "Milord—"

"Ronin."

"Ronin, is there something you'd like to tell me about your son?"

Ronin sighed and regarded her somberly. "Och, and is there," he admitted. "But I canna, lass. He must tell you himself."

"Why doesn't he trust me?"

"It's not you he doesn't trust, lass," Balder said, entering the Greathall with a fresh shirt. Like Grimm, he moved silently. "It's that he doesn't trust himself."

Jillian eyed Grimm's uncle. Her gaze darted between him and Ronin. There was something indefinable nagging at the back of her mind, but she simply couldn't put her finger on it. They were both watching her intently, almost hopefully. But what were they hoping for? Baffled, Jillian finished her cider and placed the goblet on a nearby table. "I suppose I should go find Grimm."

"Just doona go looking down the central hall, Jillian," Balder said quickly, regarding her intently. "He rarely goes there, but if he does, it's because he's wishin' for some privacy."

"The central hall?" Jillian's brow furrowed. "I thought this was the central hall." She waved her arm at the Greathall, where they'd dined.

"No, this is the front hall. I mean the one that runs off the back of the castle. Actually, it tunnels right into the heart of the mountain itself. It's where he used to run to when he was a boy."

"Oh." She inclined her head. "Thank you," she added, but had no idea what she was thanking him for. His cryptic comment seemed to have been issued as a deterrent, but it sounded suspiciously like an invitation to snoop. She shook her head briskly and excused herself, consumed by curiosity.

After she left, Ronin grinned at Balder. "He never went there when he was a boy. He hasn't even seen the Hall of Lords yet! You're a sneaky bastard, you are," he exclaimed admiringly.

"I always told you I got the lion's share o' brains in the family." Balder preened and poured them both another glass of cider. "Are the torches lit, Ronin? You left it unlocked, didn't you?"

"Course I did! You dinna get *all* the brains. But Balder, what if she can't figure it out? Or worse, can't accept it?"

"That woman has a head on her shoulders, brother. She's fairly burstin' with questions, but she keeps her tongue. Not because she's meek, but out of love for your boy. She's dyin' to know what happened here fifteen years ago, and she's waitin' patiently for Gavrael to tell her. So we'll be givin' her the answers another way to be certain she's prepared when he finally speaks." Balder paused and regarded his brother sternly. "You dinna used to be such a coward, Ronin. Stop waitin' for him to come to you. Go to him as you wish you had years ago. Do it, Ronin."

* * * * *

Jillian made a beeline for the central hall, or as much of a beeline as she was capable of given that wandering around inside Castle Maldebann was akin to roaming an uncharted city. She navigated confusing corridors, proceeding in the direction she hoped led back toward the mountain, determined to find the central hall. It was obvious Balder and Ronin wished her to see it. Would it give her answers about Grimm?

After thirty minutes of frustrated searching, she looped through a series of twisting hallways and around a corner that opened into a second Greathall, even larger than the one she'd breakfasted in. She stepped forward hesitantly; the hall was definitely old—perhaps as ancient as the standing stones erected by the mystical Druids.

Someone had conveniently lit torches—the interfering brothers, she concluded gratefully—for there was not one window in this part of the structure, and how could there be? This Greathall was actually inside the belly of the mountain. She shivered, rattled by the idea. She crossed the huge room slowly, drawn by the mysterious double doors set into the wall at the other end. They towered above her, wrapped in bands of steel, and above the arched opening bold letters had been chiseled.

"*Deo non fortuna*," she whispered, driven by the same impulse to speak in hushed tones that she'd suffered in Caithness's chapel.

She pressed against the massive doors and held her breath as they swung inward, revealing the central hall Balder had spoken of. Wide-eyed, she moved forward with the dreamy gait of a sleepwalker, riveted by what lay before her. The flowing lines of the hall commanded the eyes upward, and she pivoted slowly, arching her head back and marveling at the ceiling. Pictures and murals covered the vast expanse, some of them so vibrant and realistic that her hands begged to touch them. A chill coursed through her as she tried to comprehend what she was seeing. Was she gazing up at centuries of the history of the McIlloch? She dragged her gaze downward, only to discover new wonders. The walls of the hall held portraits. Hundreds of them!

Jillian glided along the wall. It took only a few moments for her to realize she was walking down a historical genealogy, a time line done in portraits. The first pictures were chiseled in stone, some directly into the wall, with names carved beneath them—odd names she couldn't begin to pronounce. As she worked her way down the wall, the methods of depiction became more modern, as did the clothing. It was apparent that much care had been given to repainting and restoring the portraits to maintain their accuracy over the centuries.

As she progressed down the time line toward the present, the portraits became more graphically detailed, which deepened her growing sense of confusion. Colors were brighter, more painstakingly applied. Her eyes darting between portraits, she moved forward and back again, comparing portraits of children to their subsequent adult portraits.

She must be mistaken.

Incredulous, Jillian closed her eyes a minute, then opened them slowly and

stepped back a few paces to study an entire section. It couldn't be. Grabbing a torch, she moved nearer, peering intently at a cluster of boys at their mothers' skirts. They were beautiful boys, dark-haired, brown-eyed boys who would certainly grow into dangerously handsome men.

She moved to the next portraits and there they were again: dark-haired, blue-eyed, dangerously handsome men.

Eyes didn't change color.

Jillian retraced her steps and studied the woman in the last portrait. She was a stunning auburn-haired woman with five brown-eyed boys at her skirts. Jillian then moved to her right; it was either the same woman or her identical twin. Five men clustered around her in various poses, all looking directly at the artist, leaving no doubt as to the color of their eyes. Ice blue. The names beneath the portraits were the same. She moved farther down the hall, bewildered.

Until she found the sixteenth century.

Unfortunately, the portraits raised more questions than they answered, and she sank to her knees in the hall for a long time, thinking.

Hours passed before she managed to sort through it all to her satisfaction. When she had, no question remained in her mind—she was an intelligent woman, able to exercise her powers of deductive reasoning with the best of them. And those powers told her that, though it defied her every rational thought, there was simply no other explanation. She was sitting on her knees, clad in a disheveled plaid, clutching a nearly burned-out torch in a hall filled with Berserkers.



CHAPTER 32

GRIMM PACED THE TERRACE, FEELING LIKE A FOOL. HE'D sat across the table and shared food with his da, managing to make civil conversation until Jillian had arrived. Then Ronin had mentioned Jolyn, and he'd felt fury rise up so quickly he'd nearly lunged across the table and grabbed the old man by the throat.

But Grimm was intelligent enough to realize that much of the anger he felt was at himself. He needed information and was afraid to ask. He needed to talk to Jillian, but what could he tell her? He had no answers himself. *Confront your da*, his conscience demanded. *Find out what really happened*.

The idea terrified him. If he discovered he was wrong, his entire world would look radically different.

Besides, he had other things to worry about. He had to make certain Jillian didn't discover what he was, and he needed to warn Balder that the McKane were on his heels. He needed to get Jillian somewhere safe before they attacked, and he needed to figure out why he, his uncle, and his da were all Berserkers. It just seemed too coincidental, and Balder kept alluding to information he didn't possess. Information he couldn't ask for.

"Son."

Grimm spun around. "Doona call me that," he snapped, but the protest didn't carry its usual venom.

Ronin expelled a gust of air. "We need to talk."

"It's too late. You said all you had to say years ago."

Ronin crossed the terrace and joined Grimm at the wall. "Tuluth is beautiful, isn't she?" he asked softly.

Grimm didn't reply.

"Lad, I..."

"Ronin, did you..."

The two men looked at each other searchingly. Neither noticed as Balder stepped out onto the terrace.

"Why did you leave and never come back?" The words burst from Ronin's lips with the pent-up anguish of fifteen years of waiting to say them.

"Why did I leave?" Grimm echoed incredulously.

"Was it because you were afraid of what you'd become?"

"What *I* became? I never became what you are!"

Ronin gaped at him. "How can you be sayin' that when you have the blue eyes? You have the bloodlust."

"I know I'm a Berserker," Grimm replied evenly. "But I'm *not* insane."

Ronin blinked. "I never said you were."

"You did too. That night at the battle, you told me I was just like you," he reminded bitterly.

"And you are."

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are—"

"You killed my mother!" Grimm roared, with all the anguish built up from fifteen years of waiting.

Balder moved forward instantly, and Grimm found himself the uncomfortable focus of two pairs of intense blue eyes.

Ronin and Balder exchanged a glance of astonishment. "*That's* why you never came home?" Ronin said carefully.

Grimm breathed deeply. Questions exploded from him, and now that he'd begun asking he thought he might never stop. "How did I get brown eyes to begin with? How come you're both Berserkers too?"

"Oh, you really are dense, aren't you?" Balder snorted. "Come on, canna you put two and two together yet, lad?"

Every muscle in Grimm's body spasmed. Thousands of questions collided with hundreds of suspicions and dozens of suppressed memories, and it all coalesced into the unthinkable. "Is someone else my father?" he demanded.

Ronin and Balder watched him, shaking their heads.

"Well, then why did you kill my mother?" he roared. "And doona be telling me we're born this way. You may have been born crazy enough to kill your wife, but I'm not."

Ronin's face stiffened with fury. "I canna believe you think I killed Jolyn."

"I found you over her body," Grimm persisted. "*You were holding the knife.*"

"I removed it from her heart." Ronin gritted. "Why would I kill the only woman I ever loved? How could you, of all people, possibly think I could kill my true mate? Could you kill Jillian? Even in the midst of Berserkergang, could you kill her?"

"Never!" Grimm thundered the word.

"Then you realize you misunderstood."

"You lunged for me. I would have been next!"

"You are my son," Ronin breathed. "I *needed* you. I needed to touch you; to know you were alive; to reassure myself that the McKane hadn't gotten you too."

Grimm stared at him blankly. "The McKane? Are you telling me the McKane killed mother? The McKane didn't even attack until sundown. Mother died in the morning."

Ronin regarded him with a mixture of amazement and anger. "The McKane had been waiting in the hills all day. They had a spy among us and had discovered Jolyn was pregnant again."

A look of horror crossed Grimm's face. "Mother was pregnant?"

Ronin rubbed his eyes. "Aye. We'd thought she wouldn't bear more children—it was unexpected. She hadn't gotten pregnant since you, and that had been nearly fifteen years. It would have been a late child, but we were so lookin' forward to havin' another—" Ronin broke off abruptly. He swallowed several times. "I lost everythin' in one day," he said, his eyes glittering brightly. "And all these years I thought you wouldn't come home because you dinna understand what you were. I despised myself for havin' failed you. I thought you hated me for makin' you what you are and for not bein' there to teach you how to deal with it. I spent years fightin' my urge to come after you and claim you as my son, to prevent the McKane from trackin' you. You'd managed to pretty effectively disappear. And now... now I discover that all these years I've been watchin' you, waitin' for you to come home, you were hatin' me. You were out there thinkin' I killed Jolyn!" Ronin turned away bitterly.

"The McKane killed my mother?" Grimm whispered. "Why would they care if she was pregnant?"

Ronin shook his head and looked at Balder. "How did I raise a son who was so thickheaded?"

Balder shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"You still doona get it, do you, Gavrael? What I was tryin' to tell you all those years ago: We—the McIlloch men—we're *born* Berserk. Any son born of the Laird's direct line is a Berserker. The McKane have hunted us for a thousand years. They know our legends nearly as well as we do. The prophecy was that we would be virtually destroyed, whittled down to three." He waved his arms in a gesture that encompassed the three of them. "But one lad would return home, brought by his true mate, and destroy the McKane. The McIlloch would become mightier than ever before. *You* are that lad."

"B-b-born Berserk?" Grimm stuttered.

"Yes," both men responded in a single breath.

"But I turned into one," Grimm floundered. "Up on Wotan's Cleft. I called on Odin."

Ronin shook his head. "It just seemed that way. It was first blood in battle that

brought the Berserker out. Normally our sons doona turn until sixteen. First battle accelerated your change."

Grimm sank to a seat on the wall and buried his face in his hands. "Why did you never tell me what I was before I changed?"

"Son, it's not like we hid it from you. We started tellin' you the legends at a young age. You were entranced, remember?" Ronin broke off and laughed. "I recall you runnin' around, tryin' to 'become a Berserker' for years. We were pleased you welcomed your heritage with such open arms. Go, go look in the blasted Hall of Lords, Gavrael—"

"Grimm," Grimm corrected stubbornly, holding on to some part of his identity—any part.

Ronin continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "There are ceremonies we hold, when we pass on the secrets and teach our sons to deal with the Berserker rage. Your time was approachin', but suddenly the McKane attacked. I lost Jolyn and you left, never once lookin' west to Maldebann, to me. And now I know you were hatin' me, accusin' me of the most vile thing a man could do."

"We train our sons, Gavrael," Balder said. "Intense discipline: mental, emotional, and physical trainin'. We instruct them to command the Berserker, not be commanded by it. You missed that trainin', yet I must say that even on your own you did well. Without any training, without any understandin' of your nature, you remained honorable and have grown into a fine Berserker. Donna be thrashin' yourself for seein' things at fourteen with the half-opened eyes of a fourteen-year-old."

"So I'm supposed to repopulate Maldebann with Berserkers?" Grimm suddenly fixated on Ronin's words about the prophecy.

"It's been foretold in the Hall of Lords."

"But Jillian doesn't know what I am," Grimm said despairingly. "And any son she has will be just like me. We can never—" He was unable to finish the thought aloud.

"She's stronger than you think she is, lad," Ronin replied. "Trust in her. Together you can learn about our heritage. It is an honor to be a Berserker, not a curse."

Most of Alba's greatest heroes have been our kind."

Grimm was silent a long time, trying to recolor fifteen years of thinking. "The McKane are coming," he said finally, latching on to one solid fact in an internal landscape deluged by intangibles.

Both men's eyes flew to the surrounding mountains. "Did you see something move on the mountains?"

"No. They've been following me. They've tried three times now to take me. They've been on our heels since we left Caithness."

"Wonderful!" Balder rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation.

Ronin looked delighted. "How far behind you were they?"

"I suspect scarcely a day."

"So they'll be here anytime. Lad, you must go find Jillian. Take her to the heart of the castle and explain. Trust her. Give her the chance to work through things. If you had known the truth years ago, would fifteen years have been wasted?"

"She'll hate me when she discovers what I am," Grimm said bitterly.

"Are you as certain of that as you were that I killed Jolyn?" Ronin asked pointedly.

Grimm's eyes flew to his. "I'm no longer certain of anything," he said bleakly.

"You're certain you love her, lad," Ronin said. "And I'm certain she's your mate. Never has one of our true mates rejected our heritage. Never."

Grimm nodded and turned for the castle.

"Be certain she stays in the castle, Gavrael," Ronin called to his back. "We canna risk her in battle."

After Grimm had disappeared into Maldebann, Balder smiled. "He dinna try to correct you when you called him Gavrael."

Ronin's smile was joyous. "I noticed," he said. "Prepare the villagers, Balder, and I'll rouse the guards. We put an end to the feuding today. All of it."

CHAPTER 33

IT WAS EARLY AFTERNOON WHAN JULLIAN FINNALLY ROSE to her feet in the Hall of Lords. A sense of peace enveloped her as she laid the last of her questions to rest. Suddenly so many things she'd overheard her brothers and Quinn saying when Grimm had been in residence made sense, and upon reflection she suspected a part of her had always known.

Her love was a legendary warrior who had grown to despise himself, cut off from his roots. But now that he was home and given the time to explore those roots, he might be able to make peace with himself at long last.

She strolled the hall a final time, not missing the radiant expressions of the McIlloch brides. She stood for a long moment beneath the portrait of Grimm and his parents. Jolyn had been a chestnut-haired beauty; love radiated from her patient smile. Ronin was gazing adoringly at her. In the portrait, Grimm was kneeling before his seated parents, looking like the happiest brown-eyed boy in the world.

Her hands moved to her belly in a timeless feminine celebration as she wondered what it would be like to bring another boy like Grimm into the world. How proud she would be, and together with Grimm, Balder, and Ronin, they would teach him what he could be, and how special he was—one of Alba's own private warriors.

"Och, lass, tell me you're not breeding!" a voice filled with loathing spat.

Jillian's scream ricocheted off the cold stone walls as Ramsay Logan's hand closed on her shoulder in a painful, viselike grip.

* * * * *

"I can't find her," Grimm said tightly.

Ronin and Balder turned as one when he stormed into the Greathall. The guards were ready, the villagers had been roused, and to the last man Tuluth was prepared to fight the McKane.

"Did you check in the Hall of Lords?"

"Aye, a brief glance, enough to assure myself she wasn't there." If he'd looked longer he might never have dragged himself back out, so fascinated was he by his previously unknown heritage.

"Did you search the whole castle?"

"Aye." He buried his hands in his hair, voicing his worst fear. "Is it possible the McKane got in here and took her somehow?"

Ronin expelled a gust of air. "Anythin's possible, lad. There were deliveries from the village this afternoon. Hell, anyone could have sneaked in with 'em. We've grown a bit lax in fifteen years of peace."

A sudden cry from the guardhouse compelled their instant attention.

"The McKane are comin'!"

* * * * *

Connor McKane rode into the vale waving a flag of Douglas plaid, which, while it confused most of the McIlloch, filled Grimm with rage and fear. The only piece of Douglas plaid a McKane could have obtained was the one from Jillian's body. She'd worn the blue and gray fabric at breakfast only this morning.

The villagers were bristling to fight, eager to demand satisfaction for the loss of their loved ones fifteen years past. As Ronin prepared to order them forward, Grimm laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"They have Jillian," he said in a voice that sounded like death.

"How can you be sure?" Ronin's gaze flew to his.

"That's my plaid they're waving. Jillian was wearing it at breakfast."

Ronin closed his eyes. "Not again," he whispered. "Not again." When he opened his eyes, they burned with the inner fire of determination. "We won't lose her, lad. Bring the McKane laird forward," he commanded the guard.

The McIlloch troops emanated hostility but drew back to permit his approach. When Connor McKane drew up in front of Ronin he scowled. "I knew you'd heal from the battle-ax, you devil, but I didn't think you'd recover so well from me killing your pretty whore of a wife." Connor bared his teeth in a smile. "*And*

your unborn child."

Although Ronin's hand fisted around his claymore, he didn't free the sword. "Let the lass go, McKane. She has nothin' to do with us."

"The lass may be breeding."

Grimm went rigid on Occam's back. "She's not," he countered coolly. *Surely she would have told him!*

Connor McKane searched his face intently. "That's what she says. But I don't trust either of you."

"Where is she?" Grimm demanded.

"Safe."

"Take me, Connor, take me in her stead," Ronin offered, stunning Grimm.

"You, old man?" Connor spat. "You're not a threat anymore—we saw to that years ago. You won't be having any more sons. Now, him"—he pointed to Grimm—"he's a problem. Our spies tell us he is the last living Berserker, and the woman who may or may not be pregnant is his mate."

"What do you want from me?" Grimm said quietly.

"Your life," the McKane said simply. "To see the last of the McIlloch die is all I've ever wanted."

"We're not the monsters you think we are." Ronin glowered at the McKane chieftain.

"You're pagans. Heathens, blasphemers to the one true religion—"

"You're hardly one to judge!" Ronin exclaimed.

"Duma think to debate the Lord's word with me, McIlloch. The voice of Satan will not tempt me from God's course."

Ronin's lip drew back in a snarl. "When man thinks he knows God's course better than God himself is when hundreds die—"

"Free Jillian and you may have my life," Grimm interrupted. "But she goes free. You will entrust her to"—Grimm glanced at Ronin—"my da." He tried to meet Ronin's gaze when he named him his sire, but couldn't.

"I dinna recover you to lose you again, lad," Ronin muttered harshly.

"What a touching reunion," Connor remarked dryly.

"But lose him you will. And if you want her, Gavrael McIlloch—last of the Berserkers—free her yourself. She's up there." He pointed to Wotan's Cleft. "In the caves."

Horried, Grimm scanned the jagged face of the cliff. "Where in the caves?" Dread filled him at the thought of Jillian wandering in the darkness, skirting dangers she couldn't even know were there: collapsed tunnels, rock slides, dangerous pits.

"Find her yourself."

"How do I know this isn't a trap?" Grimm's eyes glittered dangerously.

"You don't," the McKane said flatly. "But if she is in there, it's very dark and there are a lot of dangerous chasms. Besides, what would I gain by sending you off into the caves?"

"They could be set to explode," Grimm said tightly.

"Then I guess you better get her out fast, McIlloch," the McKane provoked.

Ronin shook his head. "We need proof that she's in there. And alive."

Connor dispatched a guard with a low rush of words.

Some time later, that proof was offered. Jillian's piercing scream ripped through the tense air of the valley.

* * * * *

Ronin watched in silence as Grimm climbed the rocky pass to Wotan's Cleft.

Balder was far back in the ranks, his features concealed by a heavy cloak to prevent the McKane from realizing there was yet another unmated Berserker still

alive. Ronin had insisted they not reveal his existence unless it was necessary to save lives.

From different vantages, the brothers admired the young man mounting the cleft. He'd left Occam behind and was scaling the sheer face of the cliff with a skill and ease that revealed the preternatural prowess of the Berserker. After years of hiding what he was, he now flaunted his superiority to the enemy. He was a warrior, at one with the beast, born to survive and endure. When he topped the cliff and disappeared over the edge the two clans sat their horses in battle lines, staring across the space that separated them with hatred so palpable it hung in the air as thick and oppressive as the smoke that had filled the vale fifteen years past.

Until Jillian and Grimm—or, God forbid, a McKane—topped the edge of the cliff, neither side would move. The McKane hadn't come to Tuluth to lose any more of their clan; they'd come to take Gavrael and eliminate the last of the Berserkers.

The McIlloch didn't move out of fear for Jillian.

The time stretched painfully.

* * * * *

Grimm entered the tunnel silently. His every instinct demanded he bellow for Jillian, but that would only alert whoever was holding her to his presence. The memory of her terrible scream both chilled his blood and made it boil for vengeance.

He eased into the tunnel, gliding with the silent stealth of a mountain cat, sniffing the air like a wolf. All his animal instincts roused with chill, predatory perfection. Somewhere torches were burning; the scent was unmistakable. He followed the odor down twisting corridors, his hands outstretched in the darkness. Although the interior of the tunnels was pitch black, his heightened vision enabled him to discern the slope of the floor. Skirting deep pits and ducking beneath crumbling ceilings, he navigated the musty tunnels, following the scent.

He rounded a bend where the tunnel opened into a long straight corridor, and there she was, her golden hair gleaming in the torchlight.

"Stop right there," Ramsay Logan warned. "Or she dies."

It was a vision from one of his worst nightmares. Ramsay had Jillian at the end of the tunnel. He'd gagged and bound her. She was wearing the McKane tartan, and the sight of it on her body filled him with fury. The question of who had stripped and reclothed her tortured him. He assessed her quickly, assuring himself that whatever had made her scream had not drawn blood or left visible sign of injury. The blade Logan was holding to her throat had not pierced her delicate skin. Yet.

"Ramsay Logan." Grimm gave him a chilling smile.

"Not surprised to see me, eh, Roderick? Or should I say McIlloch?" He spat the name as if he'd found a foul thing lying on his tongue.

"No, I can't say I'm surprised." Grimm moved stealthily nearer. "I always knew what kind of man you are."

"I said stop, you bastard. I won't hesitate to kill her."

"And then what would you do?" Grimm countered, but drew to a halt. "You'll never make it past me, so what would killing Jillian accomplish?"

"I'd get the pleasure of ridding the world of McIlloch monsters yet to be. And if I don't come out, the McKane will destroy you when you do."

"Let her go. Release her and you can have me," Grimm offered. Jillian thrashed in Ramsay's tight grip, making it clear that she wanted no such thing.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, McIlloch."

Grimm said nothing, his eyes murderous. A score of yards lay between them, and Grimm wondered if the Berserker rage could get him across it and free Jillian before Ramsay could slice with the knife.

It was too risky to chance, and Ramsay was counting on that to stay him. But something didn't make sense. What did Logan hope to gain? If he killed Jillian, Ramsay knew Grimm would go Berserk and rip him to shreds. What was Logan's plan? He began to ask questions, trying to buy precious minutes. "Why are you doing this, Logan? I know we've had our disagreements in the past, but

they were minor."

"It has nothing to do with our disagreements and everything to do with what you are." Ramsay sneered. "You're not human, McIlloch."

Grimm closed his eyes, unwilling to see the look of horror he was certain would be on Jillian's face. "When did you figure it out?" Keeping Ramsay talking might give him insight into what the bastard wanted. If it was his life and his alone, and he could assure Jillian's safety by giving it, he would gladly die. But if Ramsay planned to kill them both, Grimm would die fighting for her.

"I figured it out the day you killed the mountain cat. I was standing in the trees and saw you after you transformed. Hatchard called you by your real name." Ramsay shook his head in disgust. "All those years at court I never knew. Oh, I knew who Gavrael McIlloch was—hell, I think everyone does but your lovely bitch here." He laughed when Grimm stiffened. "Careful, or I cut."

"So you aren't the one who tried to poison me?" Grimm inched forward so gracefully he didn't appear to be moving.

Ramsay roared with laughter. "That was a fine fix. Hell yes, I tried to poison you. Even that backfired; you switched it somehow. But I didn't know you were a Berserker then, or I wouldn't have wasted my time."

Grimm winced. It was out. But Jillian's face was turned to the side, away from the knife, and he couldn't make out her expression.

"No," Ramsay continued. "I had no idea. I just wanted you out of the running for Jillian. You see, I need the lass."

"I was right. You need her dowry."

"But you don't know the half of it. I'm in to Campbell so deeply, he's holding the titles to my land. In years past the Logans hired out as mercenaries, but there haven't been any good wars lately. Do you know when we hired out as mercenaries last? Stop moving!" he bellowed.

Grimm stood impassively. "When?"

"Fifteen years ago. To the McKane, you bastard. And fifteen years ago, Gavrael

McIllloch killed my da and three of my brothers."

Grimm hadn't known. The battle was a blur in his mind, his first Berserker rage. "In fair battle. And if your clan hired out they weren't even fighting for a cause, but murdering for coin. If they were in Tuluth, they were attacking my home and slaughtering my people—"

"You're not people. You're not *human*"

"Jillian's not part of this. Let her go. It's me you want."

"She's part of it if she's breeding, McIllloch. She swears she's not, but I think I'll keep her just to make sure. The McKane told me a lot about you monsters. I know the boys are born Berserkers but don't change until they get older. A boy slips out of her womb, he's dead. If it's a girl, who knows. I may let it live. She could be a pretty toy."

Grimm finally managed to get a glimpse of Jillian's face. It was drawn in a mask of horror. So it was out. She knew, and it was over. The fear and revulsion he'd glimpsed in his nightmares had indeed been a portent. The fight nearly fled him when he saw it, and would have had she not been in danger. He could die now. He may as well, because inside he already had. But not Jillian; she must live.

"She's not pregnant, Ramsay."

Wasn't she? Memories of her sudden nausea at the cottage surfaced in his mind. Of course Ramsay couldn't know, but the mere possibility of Jillian carrying his child sent a primitive thrill of exultation through Grimm's body. His need to protect her, already all-consuming, became the singular focus of his mind. Ramsay might have the upper hand, but Grimm refused to let him win.

"As if you would tell me the truth." Logan scoffed. "There's only one way to find out. Besides, whether she is or isn't, she'll still be wedding me. I want the gold she brings as her dowry. Between her and what the McKane pay me, I'll never have to worry about wealth again. Don't worry, I'll keep her alive. So long as she breathes, Gibraltar will do anything to keep her happy, which means an endless supply of coin."

"You son of a bitch. Just let her go!"

"You want her? Come and get her." Ramsay taunted.

Grimm stepped forward, eyeing the distance. In the instant he hesitated, Ramsay moved the blade, pricking Jillian's skin, and drops of crimson blood fell.

The Berserker, simmering with rage, erupted.

Even as he wondered why Ramsay would dare goad the Berserker into appearing, instinct plunged him forward. He had been considering cutting himself to bring on the rage, when Ramsay had done it for him. One leap brought him ten paces forward. He tried to stop, sensing an unknown trap, but the floor of the cave disappeared beneath his feet and he plunged into a chasm that hadn't existed when he'd played these tunnels as a boy. A chasm deep enough to kill even a Berserker.

"Good riddance, you bastard," Ramsay said with a smile. He held the torch above the previously concealed pit and peered as deep as the flames would permit. He waited a full five minutes but heard no sound. When he'd selected his trap, he'd tossed stones into the chasm to test the depth. None of the stones had yielded a sound, so deep was the aperture yawning into the core of the earth. If Grimm hadn't been ripped to shreds on rocky slag, the fall itself would crush every bone in his body. Skirting the pit, he dragged Jillian from the caves.

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"It's done!" Ramsay Logan cried. "The McKane!" he roared. He stood on the edge of Wotan's Cleft, raised his arm, and bellowed a cry of victory that was instantly echoed by all the McKane. The valley resounded with triumphant thunder. Exuberant, Ramsay released Jillian's hands and removed her gag. His took her mouth in a triumphant, brutal kiss. She stiffened, revolted, and struggled against him. Angered by her resistance, he shoved her away, and Jillian crumpled to her knees.

"Get up, you stupid bitch," Ramsay shouted, nudging at her with his foot. "I said get up!" he roared again when she responded to his kick by curling into a ball. "I don't need you right now anyway," he muttered, gazing down at the valley that would be his home. Adulation lay in the valley, a reflection of his mighty conquest. He waved his arm again, elated by the kill.

Ramsay Logan had taken a Berserker single-handed. His name would live in

legends. The chasm was so deep that not even one of Odin's monsters could survive the fall. He'd carefully covered it with thin sheaves of wood, then scattered stone dust atop it. It had been brilliant, if he had to say so himself.

"Brilliant," Ramsay informed the night.

Behind Ramsay, Grimm blinked, trying to clear the red haze of bloodlust. A part of his mind that seemed lost down an endless corridor reminded him that he wanted to attack the man standing near the balled-up woman, not the woman herself. The woman was his world. When he sprang he must be careful, very careful, for to even touch her with the strength of Berserker gang could kill her. A slight brush of his hand could shatter her jaw, the merest caress of her breast could crush her ribs.

To those sitting the horses in the valley below, listening to Ramsay Logan's victory cry, the creature seemed to explode out of the night with such speed it was impossible to identify. A blur of motion surged through the air, grabbed Ramsay Logan by the hair, and neatly severed his head before anyone could so much as shout a warning.

Because she was on the ground, the clans gathered below couldn't see Jillian roll over, startled by the slight hissing sound the blade made as it whisked through the air for Ramsay's throat. But the creature on the cliffs saw her move, and he waited for her judgment, resigned to condemnation.

It was the worst Jillian might ever see of him, the beast realized. In the full throes of Berserker gang, he towered over her, his blue eyes blazing incandescently. He was bruised and bloody from a fall that had halted abruptly on a jagged outcropping, and he held Ramsay Logan's severed head in one hand. He stared at her, pumping great gasps of air into his chest, waiting. Would she scream? Spit at him, hiss and renounce him? Jillian St. Clair was all he'd ever wanted in his entire life, and as he waited for her to shriek in horror of him, he felt something inside him trying to die.

But the Berserker wouldn't go down so easily. The wildness in him rose to its full height and stared down at her through vulnerable ice-blue eyes, wordlessly beseeching her love.

Jillian raised her head slowly and gazed at him a long, silent moment. She drew

herself upright into a sitting position and tilted her head back, her eyes wide.

Berserker.

The truth he'd struggled so hard to hide hung between them, fully exposed.

Although Jillian had known what Grimm was before that moment, she was briefly immobilized by the sight of him. It was one thing to know that the man she loved was a Berserker—it was another thing entirely to behold it. He regarded her with such an inhuman expression that if she hadn't peered deep into his eyes, she might have seen nothing of Grimm at all. But there, deep in the flickering blue flames, she glimpsed such love that it rocked her soul. She smiled up at him through her tears.

A wounded sound of disbelief escaped him.

Jillian gave him the most dazzling smile she could muster and placed her fist to her heart. "And the daughter wed the lion king," she said clearly.

An expression of incredulity crossed the warrior's face. His blue eyes widened and he stared at her in stunned silence.

"I love you, Gavrael McIlloch."

When he smiled, his face blazed with love. He tossed his head back and shouted his joy to the sky.

* * * * *

The last of the McKane died in the vale of Tuluth, December 14, 1515.

CHAPTER 34

"THEY'RE COMING, HAWK!" ADRIENNE SPED INTO THE Greathall where Hawk, Lydia, and Tavis were busy decorating for the wedding. As the ceremony was being held on Christmas Day, they'd combined the customary decorations with the gaily colored greens and reds of the season. Exquisite wreaths fashioned of pinecones and dried berries had been decorated with brilliant velvet bows and shimmering ribbons. The finest tapestries adorned the walls, including one Adrienne had helped to weave over the past year that featured a Nativity scene with a radiant Madonna cradling the infant Jesus while proud Joseph and the magi looked on.

Today the hall was clear of rushes, the stones scoured to a spotless gray. Later, only moments before the wedding, they would strew dried rose petals across the stones to release a springy floral aroma into the air. Sprigs of mistletoe dangled from every beam and Adrienne eyed the foliage, peering up at Hawk, who stood on a ladder, fastening a wreath to the wall.

"What are those lovely sprigs you've hung, Hawk?" Adrienne asked, the picture of innocence.

Hawk glanced down at her. "Mistletoe. It's a Christmas tradition."

"How is it associated with Christmas?"

"The legends say the Scandinavian god of peace, Balder, was slain by an arrow fashioned of mistletoe. The other gods and goddesses loved Balder so greatly, they begged his life be restored and mistletoe be endowed with special meaning."

"What kind of special meaning?" Adrienne blinked expectantly up at him.

Hawk slid swiftly down the ladder, happy to demonstrate. He kissed her so passionately that the embers of desire, always at a steady burn around her husband, roared into flame. "One who passes beneath the mistletoe must be kissed thoroughly."

"Mmm. I like this tradition. But what happened to poor Balder?"

Hawk grinned and planted another kiss on her lips. "Balder was returned to life and the care of mistletoe was bequeathed to the goddess of love. Each time a kiss is given beneath mistletoe, love and peace gain a stronger foothold in the world of mortals."

"How lovely," Adrienne exclaimed. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "So essentially, the more I kiss you under this branch"—she pointed up—"the more good I'm doing the world. One might say I'm helping all of humankind, doing my duty—"

"Your duty?" Hawk arched a brow.

Lydia laughed and rugged Tavis beneath the branch as well. "It sounds like a good idea to me, Adrienne. Maybe if we kiss them enough we'll lay all the silly feuding in this land to rest."

The next few minutes belonged to lovers, until the door burst open and a guard announced the arrival of their guests.

Adrienne's gaze darted about the Greathall as she fretted over anything that might be yet undone. She wanted everything to be perfect for Grimm's bride. "How do I say it again?" she asked Lydia frantically. She'd been trying to perfect her Gaelic so she could greet them with a proper "Merry Christmas."

"*Nollaig Chridheil*," Lydia repeated slowly.

Adrienne repeated it several times, then linked her arm through Hawk's and smiled beatifically. "My wish came true, Hawk," she said smugly.

"What was that blasted wish, anyway?" Hawk said, disgruntled.

"That Grimm Roderick find the woman who would heal his heart as you healed mine, my love." Adrienne would never call a man "radiant"; it seemed a feminine word. But when her husband gazed down at her with his eyes glowing so lovingly, she whispered a fervent "thank you" in the direction of the Nativity scene. Then she added a silent benediction for any and all other beings responsible for the events that had carried her across five hundred years to find him. Scotland was a magical place, rich in legends, and Adrienne embraced them because the underlying themes were universal: Love endured, and it could heal all.

* * * * *

It was a traditional wedding, if such could be between a woman and a man of legend—a Berserker no less, with two more of the epic warriors in attendance. The women fussed and the men shared toasts. At the last minute, Gibraltar and Elizabeth St. Clair arrived. They had ridden like the devil the moment they'd received the message that Jillian was to be wed at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea.

Jillian was elated to see her parents. Elizabeth and Adrienne helped her dress while they resolved that both "das" should escort the bride to the groom's side. Ronin had already been solicited for the honor, but Elizabeth maintained that Gibraltar would never recover if he wasn't allowed to escort her too. Yes, she knew that Jillian hadn't expected them to be able to make it in time, but they had and that was the end of it.

The bride and groom didn't see one another until the moment Gibraltar and Ronin escorted Jillian down the elaborate staircase into the Greathall, after a long pause at the top that permitted all and sundry to exclaim over the radiant bride.

Jillian's heart was thundering as her two "das" lifted her hands from their forearms and tucked her arm through the elbow of the man who was to be her husband. Grimm looked magnificent, clad in ceremonial tartan, his black hair neatly queued. Jillian didn't miss it when Ronin's gaze flickered over the plaid. He looked momentarily astonished, then elated, for Grimm had donned the full dress of the McIlloch for his wedding day.

She hadn't thought the day could be any more perfect until the priest began the ceremony. After what seemed like years of traditional benedictions and prayers, he moved onto the vows:

"Do you, Grimm Roderick, promise—"

Grimm's deep voice interrupted him. Pride underscored each word. "My name is Gavrael." He took a deep breath, then continued, enunciating his name clearly. "Gavrael Roderick Icarus McIlloch."

Chills swept up her spine. Tears misted Ronin's eyes and the hall fell silent for a moment. Hawk grinned at Adrienne, and far in the back of the hall where few

had as yet seen him, Quinn de Moncreiffe nodded, satisfied. At long last, Grimm Roderick was at peace with who and what he was.

"Do you, Gavrael Roderick—"

"I do."

Jillian nudged him.

He arched a brow and frowned. "Well, I *do*. Must we go through all this? I do. I swear a man has never 'I do'd' more fervently than I. I just want to be *married* to you, lass."

Ronin and Balder exchanged amused glances. Keeping them apart had certainly heightened Gavrael's enthusiasm for the matrimonial bonds.

Guests tittered, and Jillian smiled. "Let the priest have his turn, because I would like to hear you say it all. Especially the 'loving and cherishing me' part."

"Oh, I'll love and ravish you, lass," Gavrael said close to her ear.

"Cherish! And behave." She teasingly swatted at him and nodded encouragingly to the priest. "Do continue."

And so they were wed.

* * * * *

Kaley Twillow jostled for room, rising to her toes and peering over heads anxiously. Her precious Jillian was getting married and she couldn't see a dratted thing. It just wouldn't do.

"Watch where yer pokin'," an irate guest barked as she strategically jabbed her elbow in a few tender spots to squeeze past.

"Wait your turn to greet the bride!" another one complained when she stepped on his toes.

"I practically raised the wee bride, and I'll be damned if I'm sitting in back unable to see, so *move* your arse!" She glowered.

A small path appeared as they reluctantly permitted her passage.

Wedging her ample bosom and hips between a cluster of guards created a small furor as dozens of men eyed the shapely woman with interest. Finally she pushed through, crested the last wave of guests, and surfaced beside a man whose handsome height and girth took her breath away. His thick black hair was streaked with silver, revealing his mature years, which, in her experience, meant mature passion.

She peered coquettishly at the black-haired man from the corner of her eye, then turned her head to savor him fully. "My, my, and just who might you be?" She fluttered her long lashes admiringly.

Balder's ice-blue eyes crinkled with pleasure as he beheld the voluptuous woman who was obviously delighted to see him. "The man who's been waiting for you all his life, lass," he said huskily.

* * * * *

The wedding celebration began the moment the vows had been exchanged. Jillian longed to slip off with her husband the instant the ceremony ended. With Balder and

Ronin strictly monitoring her time with Gavrael for the past two weeks, they'd been able to spend no time alone at all. But she didn't wish to hurt Adrienne's feelings when she had obviously taken great care to ensure Jillian's wedding day was the stuff of dreams, so she dutifully lingered and greeted and smiled. The moment she and Gavrael had sealed their union with a kiss, she'd been snatched from his lips, tugged in one direction by the joyous crowd and able to do nothing but watch helplessly as her husband was dragged in the other.

They were married, the older and wiser had counseled, and they would have plenty of time to spend with each other. Jillian had rolled her eyes and pasted a smile on her face, accepting congratulations.

Finally, the flatbread was broken and the feasting commenced, drawing attention away from the newlyweds. Adrienne helped Jillian slip out of the hall, but instead of showing her to their chambers as she'd expected, the stunning, unusual woman had led her to Dalkeith's study. The light from oil globes and dozens of candles coupled with a cheery fire made the room a welcoming and warm haven despite the banks of fluffy white snow drifting outside the windows.

"It looks like we may get a real doozy." Adrienne eyed the drifts as she bustled about, poking up the fire.

Jillian blinked. "A what?"

"Doozy. Oh..." Adrienne paused, then laughed. "A big storm. You know, we might get snowed in for a time."

"You're not from this part of the country, are you?" Jillian frowned, trying to place her strange accent.

Again her hostess laughed. "Not quite." She beckoned Jillian to join her before the fire. "Just tell me, are those two of the hunkiest men you've ever laid eyes on?" Adrienne eyed a picture above the hewn-oak mantel and sighed dreamily.

Jillian followed her hostess's gaze upward to a beautifully rendered portrait of Gavrael and the Hawk. "Oh my. I don't know what 'hunkiest' means, but they certainly are the most handsome men I've ever seen."

"That's it," Adrienne agreed. "Do you know they complained the entire time this was being painted? Men." She rolled her eyes and gestured at the painting. "How could they blame a woman for wanting to immortalize such raw masculine splendor?"

The women spoke quietly for a time, unaware Hawk and Gavrael had entered the study behind them. Gavrael's eyes lingered on his wife and he started to move forward, determined to claim her before someone else dragged him off.

"Relax." Hawk placed a restraining hand on his sleeve. Enough distance separated the men from their wives that the women hadn't heard them yet, but Adrienne's voice carried clearly:

"It was all that fairy's fault. He dragged me back through time—not that I'm complaining a bit, mind you. I love it here and I adore my husband, but I'm originally from the twentieth century."

Both men grinned when Jillian did a double take. "Five hundred years from now?" she exclaimed.

Adrienne nodded, her eyes dancing. Jillian studied her intently, then leaned

closer. "My husband's a Berserker," she confided.

"I know. He told us right before he left for Caithness, but I didn't get a chance to ask him any questions. Can he change shapes?" Adrienne looked as if she were about to reach for paper and ink and start scribbling notes. "In the twentieth century there's a great deal of dispute over just what they were and what they were capable of." Adrienne paused as she became aware of the two men standing in the doorway. Her eyes twinkled mischievously, and she winked at her husband. "However, there *was* a general consensus on one thing, Jillian." She smiled impishly. "It was commonly held that Berserkers were known for their legendary stamina—both in battle and in the b—

"We get the point, Adrienne." Hawk cut her off, his black eyes sparkling with amusement. "Now, perhaps we should let Gavrael show her the rest himself."

* * * * *

Gavrael and Jillian's chambers were on the third floor of Dalkeith. Adrienne and Hawk escorted them, dropping not-so-subtle hints that the newlyweds could make as much noise as they wished; with the intervening floors, the revelers below would be none the wiser.

When the door closed behind them and they were finally alone, Gavrael and Jillian gazed at each other across the downy expanse of a wide mahogany bed. A fire leapt and crackled in the hearth while fluffy snowflakes fell beyond the window.

Grimm regarded her tenderly and his eyes slipped down, as they'd frequently done lately, to the scarcely noticeable swell of her abdomen. Jillian caught the possessive glance and gave him a dazzling smile. Ever since the night of the attack, when she'd told him they were going to have a baby, she'd caught him smiling at odd times with little or no provocation. It delighted her, his intense delight about the baby growing inside her. When she'd told him, after they'd returned from the caves to Maldebann, he'd sat blinking and shaking his head, as if he couldn't believe it was true. When she'd cradled his face in her hands and drawn his head close to kiss him, she'd been stunned by the glimpse of moisture in his eyes. Her husband was the best of men: strong yet sensitive, capable yet vulnerable—and how she loved him!

As she watched him now, his eyes darkened with desire, and anticipation

shivered through her.

"Adrienne said we might get snowed in for a while," Jillian said breathlessly, feeling suddenly awkward. Being chaperoned these past weeks had nearly driven her crazy; to compensate, she'd tried to push her unruly steamy thoughts into a secluded corner of her mind. Now they resisted their confines, broke free, and demanded attention. She wanted her husband *now*.

"Good. I hope it snows a dozen feet." Gavrael moved around the bed. All he wanted to do was bury himself inside her, reassure himself that she was indeed his. This day had been the culmination of all his dreams—he was married to Jillian St. Clair. Gazing down at her, he marveled at how much she had changed his life: He had a home, a clan, and a father, the wife he'd always dreamed of, a precious child on the way, and a bright future. He, who had always felt like an outcast, now belonged. And he owed it all to Jillian. He came to a stop inches from her and flashed her a lazy, sensual smile. "I doona suppose you have any noises you'd like to be making while we're snowbound? I'd hate to disappoint our hosts."

Jillian's awkwardness melted away in a flash. Skirting all niceties, she slipped her hand up his muscular thigh and tugged his plaid away from his body. Her fingers flew over the buttons of his shirt, and within moments he stood before her as nature had fashioned him—a mighty warrior with hard angles and muscled planes.

Her gaze dropped lower and fixed upon what must have surely been nature's most generous boon. She wet her lip, a wordless gesture of desire, unaware of the effect it had on him.

Gavrael groaned and reached for her. Jillian slipped into his arms, wrapped her hand around his thick shaft, and nearly purred with delight.

His eyes flared, then narrowed as he moved with the grace and power of a mountain cat, dragging her down onto the bed. A rough sigh escaped him. "Ah, I missed you, lass. I thought I was going to go crazy from wanting you. Balder wouldn't even let me kiss you!" Gavrael worked swiftly at the tiny buttons on her wedding gown. When she tightened her fingers around him, he quickly secured her hands, trapping them with one of his. "I can't think when you do that, lass."

"I didn't ask you to think, my big brawny warrior," she teased. "I have other uses for you."

He tossed her an arrogant look that clearly warned her he was in charge for the moment. With her distracting hands temporarily restrained, he lingered over her buttons, tracing kisses over each inch of skin as it was revealed. When his lips returned to hers, he kissed her with a savage intensity. Their tongues met, retreated, then met again. He tasted of brandy and cinnamon; Jillian followed his tongue, caught it with her own, and drew it into her mouth. When he stretched full length on top of her, muscled body to silken skin, her softness accommodating his hardness in perfect symmetry, she sighed her pleasure.

"Please," she begged, shifting her body enticingly beneath him.

"Please what, Jillian? What would you like me to do? Tell me exactly, lass." His heavy-lidded eyes glittered with interest.

"I want you to..." She gestured.

He nibbled her lower lip, drew back, and blinked innocently. "I'm afraid I doona understand. What was that?"

"Here." She gestured again.

"Say it, Jillian," he whispered huskily. "Tell me. I am yours to command, but I follow only very explicit instructions." The wicked grin he flashed loosened the last of her restraints, leaving her free to indulge in a bit of wickedness of her own.

So she told him, the man who was her own private legend, and he fulfilled her every secret desire, tasting and touching and pleasing her. He worshipped her body with his passion, celebrated their child in her womb with gentle kisses, kisses that lost their gentleness and became hot and hungry against her hips and blazed into flowing heat between her thighs.

Plunging her hands into his thick dark hair, she rose up against him, crying his name over and over.

Gavrael.

And after she'd run out of demands—or simply had been sated beyond coherent thought—he knelt on the bed, pulled her astride him, and wrapped her long legs around his waist. Her nails scored his back as he lowered her onto his hard shaft one exquisite inch at a time.

"You can't harm the baby, Gavrael," she assured him, panting softly as he held her away, giving her but a tiny taste of what she so desperately wanted.

"I'm not worried about that," he assured her.

"Then why... are... you... going so *slow*!"

"To watch your face," he said with a lazy smile. "I love to watch your eyes when we make love. I see every bit of pleasure, every ounce of desire reflected in them."

"They'll look even better if you'll just—" She pushed against him with her hips and, laughing, he held her away with his strong hands on her waist.

Jillian nearly wailed. "Please!"

But he took his sweet time—and how sweet it was—until she thought she could no longer bear it. Then, abruptly, he buried himself deep within her. "I love you, Jillian McIlloch." His accompanying smile was uninhibited, his white teeth flashing against his dark face.

She laid a finger to his lips. "I know," she assured him.

"But I wanted to say the words." He caught her finger between his lips and kissed it.

"I see," she teased. "You get to say all the love words while I have to say all the bawdy ones."

He made a rumble low in his throat. "I *love* it when you tell me what you want me to do to you."

"Then do this..." Her low rush of words dissolved into a satisfied cry as he fulfilled her demand.

Hours later, her last conscious thought was that she should not forget to mention

to Adrienne that the "general consensus" about Berserkers could not even begin to touch the reality.



EPILOGUE

"I DONNA UNDERSTAND IT," RONIN SAID, WATCHING THE lads. He shook his head. "It's never happened before."

"I doona either, Da. But something is different about me from any of the McIlloch males before. Either that, or there's something different about Jillian. Perhaps it's both of us."

"How do you keep up with them?"

Gavrael laughed, a rich sound. "Between Jillian and me, we manage."

"But with them being, you know, the way they are so young, aren't they constantly getting into mischief?"

"Not to mention impossibly high places. They're forever pulling off incredible feats, and if you ask me, they're just a little too damned smart for anyone's good. It's almost more than any one Berserker could be expected to keep up with. That's why I think it would be useful to have their grandda around too," Gavrael said pointedly.

The flush of pleasure on Ronin's cheeks was unmistakable. "You mean you want me to stay here with you and Jillian?"

"Maldebann is home, Da. I know you felt Jillian and I needed the privacy of newlyweds, but we wish you would come home for good. Both you and Balder; the lads need their great-uncle too. Remember, we McIlloch are the stuff of legends, and how will they come to understand the legends without the finest of our Berserkers to teach them? Quit visiting all those people you've been dropping in on and *come home*" Gavrael studied him out of the corner of his eyes and knew Ronin would not leave Maldebann again. The thought gave him great satisfaction. His sons should know their grandda. Not merely as an intermittent visitor, but as a steady influence.

In a contented silence that bordered on awe, Gavrael and Ronin watched the three young boys playing on the lawn. When Jillian stepped out into the sunshine, her sons looked up as one, as if they could sense her presence. They

stopped playing and ranged in around their mother, vying for attention.

"Now, there's a beautiful sight," Ronin said reverently.

"Aye," Gavrael agreed.

Jillian laughed as she tousled the heads of her three young sons and smiled into three pairs of ice-blue eyes.



A NORSE LEGEND

(THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS)

*Legend tells
that Ragnarok—the final battle of the gods—will
herald the end of the world.
Destruction will rage in the kingdom of the gods.
In the last battle, Odin will be devoured by a wolf.
The earth will be destroyed by fire, and the
universe will sink into the sea.
Legend holds that this final destruction will be
followed by rebirth. The earth will reemerge from
the water, lush and teeming with new life. It is
prophesied the sons of the dead Aesir will return
to Asgard, the home of the gods, and reign again.
In the mountains of Scotland, the Circle Elders say
Odin doesn't believe in taking any chances, that he
schemes to defy fate by breeding his warrior race
of Berserkers into the Scottish bloodlines, deeply
hidden. There they await the twilight of the gods,
at which time he will summon them to fight for him
once more.
Legend tells that there are Berserkers walking
among us, even still...*

The Highlander's Touch

Karen Marie Moning

*I am that merry wanderer of the night
I jest to Oberon and make him smile"...*
—A Midsummer Night's *Dream/Shakespeare*

PROLOGUE

highlands of scotland
castle brodie—1308

ADAM BLACK MATERIALIZED IN THE GREATHALL.

Silently, he observed the towering warrior who paced before the fire.

Circenn Brodie, laird and thane of Brodie, exuded the magnetism of a man born not merely to exist in his world, but to conquer it. *Power has never been so seductive*, Adam thought, *except, perhaps, in me*.

The object of his study turned from the fire, unruffled by Adam's silent presence.

"What do *you* want?" Circenn said.

Adam was not surprised by his tone. He'd learned long ago not to expect civility from this particular Highland laird. Adam Black, the deadly jester in the Fairy Queen's court, was an irritant Circenn suffered unwillingly. Kicking a chair close to the fire, Adam lounged in it backward, resting his arms over the slatted back. "Is that any way to greet me after months of absence?"

"You know I despise it when you appear without warning.

And as to your absence, I had been savoring my good fortune." Circenn turned back toward the fire.

"You would miss me if I were gone for long," Adam assured him, studying his profile. *Sinful that he looks such a powerful beast, yet comports himself with such decorum*, Adam thought. If Circenn Brodie was going to look like a savage Pict warrior, then by Dagda he should act like one.

"The same way I might miss a hole in my shield, a warthog in my bed, or a fire in my stables," Circenn said. "Turn around in your chair and sit like a proper person."

"Ah, but I am neither proper nor a person, so you needn't expect me to conform to your requirements. I shudder to think what you would do without all your

rules for a 'normal' existence, Circenn." When Circenn stiffened, Adam grinned and extended a graceful hand to a maid who'd been lingering in the shadows at the perimeter of the Greathall. He tossed his head, casting silky dark hair over his shoulder. "Come."

The maid approached, her gaze darting between Circenn and Adam, as if uncertain which man posed the greater threat. Or which the greater lure.

"May I serve milords?" she said breathlessly.

"Nay, Gillendria," Circenn dismissed her. "Off to bed with you. It is well past the goblin's hour"—he shot a dark look at Adam—"and my guest has no needs I care to see filled."

"Aye, Gillendria," Adam purred. "There are many ways you may serve me this night. I will take pleasure in teaching you all of them. Off to your quarters while we men talk. I will join you there."

The young maid's eyes widened as she hastened to obey him.

"Leave my wenches alone," Circenn ordered.

"I don't get them pregnant." Adam flashed his most insolent grin.

"That is not my concern; it is the fact that they are all but witless once you have finished with them."

"Witless? Who was witless tonight?"

Circenn tensed but said nothing.

"Where are the hallows, Circenn?" A glint of mischief kindled in Adam's remote eyes.

Circenn turned his back fully to the fairy.

"You *did* protect them for us, did you not?" Adam asked. "Don't tell me you *lost* them?" he chided when Circenn failed to reply.

Circenn turned back to face him, legs wide, head cocked, arms folded; his usual position when quietly furious. "Why do you waste my time asking me questions

when you already know the answers?"

Adam shrugged elegantly. "Because the droppers at the eaves will be unable to follow this splendid saga if we do not speak of it aloud."

"No one eavesdrops in my castle."

"I forgot," Adam purred, "no one misbehaves at Castle Brodie. Ever-spotless, ever-disciplined, perfect Castle Brodie. You bore me, Circenn. This paragon of restraint you pretend to be is a waste of the fine breeding that forged you."

"Let us have done with this conversation, shall we?"

Adam folded his arms across the back of the chair. "All right. What happened tonight? Templars were to meet you at Ballyhock. They were to entrust the hallows to your care. I heard they were ambushed."

"You heard correctly," Circenn replied evenly.

"Do you understand how important it is that the Templars be given sanctuary in Scotland, now that they've been disbanded?"

"Of course I understand," Circenn growled.

"And how imperative it is that the hallows do not fall into the wrong hands?"

Circenn waved Adam's question away with an impatient hand. "The four hallows have been secured. The moment we suspected the Templars were going to come under siege, the spear, the cauldron, the sword, and the stone were rushed back into Scotland, despite the war going on. Better they rest in a country torn than with the persecuted Templars, whose Order is being ripped asunder. The hallows are safe—"

"Except for the flask, Circenn," Adam said. "What of it? Where is it?"

"The flask is not a hallow," Circenn prevaricated.

"I know that," Adam said dryly. "But the flask is a sacred relic of our race, and we could all be in danger should it fall into the wrong hands. I repeat, where is the flask?"

Circenn plunged a hand into his hair, pushing it back from his face. Adam was struck by the sensual majesty of the man. Silky black hair was gripped between elegant fingers, revealing a face composed of strong planes, a chiseled jaw, and dark brows. He had the olive-toned skin, the intense eyes, and the aggressive, dominant temperament of his Brude ancestors.

"I doona know," Circenn finally said.

"You doona know?" Adam mimicked his brogue, aware that such an admission must have tasted foul on Circenn Brodie's tongue. Nothing was ever out of the laird of Brodie's control. Rules and more rules governed everything and everyone in Circenn's world. "A flask containing a sacred elixir, created by my race, disappears from your very grasp and you *doona know* where it is?"

"The situation is not so dire, Adam. It is not permanently lost. Think of it as... temporarily displaced, and soon to be regained."

Adam arched a brow. "You split hairs with a battle-ax. Skillful prevarication is a woman's art, Brodie. What happened?"

"Ian was carrying the chest that holds the flask. When the attack came, I was on the south side of the bridge waiting for Ian to cross over from the north. He took a blow to the head and was knocked off the bridge, into the river below. The chest was whisked away by the current—"

"And you say that is not so bad? Anyone could have it now. Would you like to see the English king get his hands on that flask? Do you understand the danger it presents?"

"Of course I do. It will not come to that, Adam," Circenn said. "I laid a geas upon the flask. It will not fall into another's hands, because the moment it is discovered it will be returned to me."

"A geas?" Adam snorted. "Puny magic. A proper fairy would have simply spelled it back out of the river."

"I am not fae. I am Brude-Scot and proud of it. Count yourself fortunate I cursed it at all. You know I have no fondness for the druid ways. Curses are unpredictable."

"What clever invocation did you choose, Circenn?" Adam asked silkily. "You *did* choose your words well, did you not?"

"Of course I did. Think you I have learned nothing from past mistakes? The moment the chest is opened and the flask is touched by a human hand it will be returned to me. I cursed it very specifically."

"Did you specify whether the flask would come by itself?" Adam asked with sudden amusement.

"What?" Circenn regarded him blankly.

"The flask. Did you consider that the mortal who touches it might be transported with the flask, if you used a binding spell?"

Circenn closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

"You used a binding spell." Adam sighed.

"I used a binding spell," Circenn admitted. "It was the only one I knew," he added defensively.

"And whose fault is that? How many times have you refused the honor of training among my people? And the answer is yes, Circenn, the man *will* be carried by the binding spell. Both man and flask will be delivered to you."

Circenn growled his frustration.

"What will you do with this man when he arrives?" Adam pressed.

"Question him, then return him to his home with all haste."

"You will kill him."

"I *knew* you would say that. Adam, he may not even understand what it is. What if an innocent man finds the chest washed up on the bank of the river somewhere?"

"You will kill the innocent man, then," Adam said easily.

"I will do no such thing."

Adam rose with the graceful surety of a snake uncoiling for the death strike. He crossed the space between them and paused an inch from Circenn. "But you will," he said softly. "Because you cursed it foolishly, with insufficient thought as to the outcome. Whoever comes with the flask will arrive in the midst of a Templar sanctuary. Your curse will bring him, innocent or not, into a place where none but your fugitive warriors may trespass. You think you can simply send him away with a fare-thee-well and never-speak-of-this, stranger? And a by-the-bye, please don't mention that half the missing Templars linger within my walls, and don't be tempted by the price on their heads." Adam rolled his eyes. "So you *will* kill him, because you pledged your life to put Robert the Bruce firmly on the throne, and to take no unnecessary risks."

"I will not kill an innocent man."

"You will or I will. And you know I have a habit of playing with my prey."

"You would torture an innocent man to death." It was not a question.

"Ah, you understand me. Your choices are simple: either you do it, or I do it. Choose."

Circenn searched the fairy's eyes. *Don't seek compassion, I have none* was the message he read there. After a protracted moment, Circenn inclined his head. "I will take care of the bearer of the flask."

"You will kill the bearer of the flask," Adam insisted. "Or I will."

Circenn's voice was flat and furious. "I will kill the man who brings the flask. But it will be done my way. Painlessly and swiftly, and you will not interfere."

"Good enough." Adam took one step backward. "Swear it upon my race. Swear it upon the *Tuatha de Danaan*."

"On one condition. In exchange for the vow I now give you, you will not darken my door again without invitation, Adam Black."

"Are you certain that's what you want?" Adam's lips thinned with displeasure. Circenn had reverted to his arms-folded, furious stance. *Such a glorious warrior, dark angel. You could have been my mightiest ally.*

"That's what I want."

Adam inclined his dark head, a mocking smile playing at the corners of his lips.
"So be it as you asked it, Brodie, son, of the Brude kings. Now swear."

To save a man from a painful death at the fairy's hands, Circenn Brodie sank to his knees and pledged upon the oldest race in Scotland, the *Tuatha de Danaan*, that he would honor his vow to kill the man who arrived with the flask. Then he sighed with relief as Adam Black, the *sin siriche du*, the blackest elf, disappeared, never to darken Circenn's door again because Circenn certainly wouldn't extend an invitation, even if he lived a thousand years.

FALLING...

*Up and down, up and down,
I will lead them up and down
I am feared in field and town.
Goblin lead them up and down.*

-A Midsummer Night's Dream/Shakespeare

CHAPTER 1

present day

"HEY! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING!" LISA CRIED, AS the Mercedes zipped around an idling taxi and passed dangerously near the curb where she stood, splashing sheets of dirty water up her jeans-clad legs.

"Well, get out of the street, you idiot!" the driver of the Mercedes yelled into his cell phone. Lisa was close enough to hear him say into the phone, "No, not you. It looked like some homeless person. You'd think as much as we pay in taxes..." His voice faded as he drove off.

"I wasn't in the street!" Lisa yelled after him, tugging her baseball cap lower on her head. Then his words sunk in. "Homeless?" *Dear God, is that what I look like?* She glanced down at her faded jeans, worn and frayed at the hems. Her white T-shirt, although clean, was soft and thin from hundreds of washings. Maybe her slicker had seen better days, a few years before she'd bought it at Secondhand Sadie's, but it was durable and kept her dry. Her boot had a hole, but he couldn't have seen that, it was in the sole. The chilly puddles from the recent rain seeped into her boot, soaking her sock. She wriggled uncomfortable toes and made a mental note to duct tape her boot again. But surely she didn't look homeless? She was spotlessly clean, or at least she had been before he'd come whizzing by.

"You don't look like a homeless person, Lisa." Ruby's indignant voice interrupted her thoughts. "He's a pompous ass who thinks anybody not driving a Mercedes doesn't deserve to live."

Lisa flashed Ruby a grateful smile. Ruby was Lisa's best friend. Every evening they chatted as they waited together for the express shuttle to the city, where Lisa went to her cleaning job and Ruby sang in a downtown club.

Lisa eyed Ruby's outfit longingly. Beneath a dove-gray raincoat with classic lines she wore a stunning black dress adorned with a string of pearls. Strappy, sexy shoes displayed French-manicured toenails; shoes that would feed Lisa and her mom for a month. Not a man alive would let his car splash Ruby Lanoue. Once, Lisa might have looked like that, too. But not now, when she was so

deeply in debt that she couldn't fathom a way out.

"And I know he didn't get a good look at your face." Ruby wrinkled her nose, irritated with the long-gone driver. "If he had, he certainly would've stopped and apologized."

"Because I look so depressed?" Lisa asked wryly.

"Because you're so beautiful, honey."

"Yeah. Right," Lisa said, and if there was a trace of bitterness, Ruby tactfully ignored it. "It doesn't matter. It's not like I'm trying to impress anyone."

"But you could. You have no idea what you look like, Lisa. He must have been gay. That's the only reason a man could miss a woman as gorgeous as you."

Lisa smiled faintly. "You just never give up, do you, Ruby?"

"Lisa, you *are* beautiful. Let me doll you up and show you off. Take off that cap and let your hair down. Why do you think God gave you such magnificent hair?"

"I like my cap." Lisa tugged at the faded bill of her Cincinnati Reds cap protectively, as if she feared Ruby might snatch it away. "Daddy bought it for me."

Ruby bit her lip hesitantly, then shrugged. "You can't hide beneath that hat forever. You know how much I care about you, and yes"—she waved away Lisa's protest before it even reached her lips—"I know your mother is dying, but that doesn't mean you are too, Lisa. You can't let it defeat you."

Lisa's expression grew shuttered. "What are you singing for your opening number tonight, Ruby?"

"Don't try to change the subject. I won't let you give up on life," Ruby said gently. "Lisa, there's so much ahead of you. You'll survive this, I promise."

Lisa averted her gaze. "But will I want to?" she muttered, kicking at the curb. Her mom, Catherine, had been diagnosed with cancer a few months ago. The diagnosis had come too late, and now little could be done with the exception of making her as comfortable as possible. *Six months, maybe a year*, the doctors had advised cautiously. *We can try experimental procedures, but...* The message

was clear: Catherine would die anyway.

Her mom had refused, with unwavering determination, to be the target of experimental procedures. Spending the last months of her life in a hospital was not how either Lisa or Catherine wanted it to end. Lisa had arranged for home health care, and now money, which had always been tight for them, was even tighter.

Since the car accident five years ago that had crippled her mother and killed her father, Lisa had been working two jobs. Her life had changed overnight following her father's death. At eighteen, she'd been the cherished daughter of wealthy parents, living in Cincinnati's most elite, private community, with a brilliant, secure future ahead of her. Twenty-four hours later, on the night of her high-school graduation, her life had become a nightmare from which there'd been no awakening. Instead of going to college, Lisa had gone to work as a waitress, then picked up a night job. Lisa knew that after her mother was gone she would continue to work two jobs, trying to pay off the astronomical medical bills that had accumulated.

She winced, recalling her mother's recent instructions that she be cremated because it was less expensive than a burial. If she thought about that comment too long she might get sick right there at the bus stop. She understood that her mom was trying to be practical, seeking to minimize expenses so Lisa would have some small chance at life when she was gone, but frankly, the prospect of life alone, without her mother, held little appeal for her.

This week Catherine had taken an irrevocable turn for the worse, and Lisa had been slapped in the face with the inescapable fact that she could do nothing to ease her mother's pain. It would stop only with death. The gamut of emotions she experienced lately was bewildering to her. Some days she felt anger at the world in general; other days she would have offered her soul in exchange for her mom's health. But the worst days were the ones when she felt a twinge of resentment beneath her grief. Those days were the worst because with the resentment came a crushing load of guilt that made her aware of how ungrateful she was. Many people had not had the chance to love their mothers for as long as she had. Some people had far less than Lisa: *Half full, Lisa*, Catherine would remind.

As they boarded the shuttle, Ruby pulled Lisa into the seat next to her and

maintained a stream of bright chatter intended to lift her spirits. It didn't work. Lisa tuned her out, trying not to think at all—and certainly not about "after." Now was bad enough.

How did it come to this? God—what has happened to my life? she wondered, massaging her temples. Beyond the glass and steel panes of the express shuttle to downtown Cincinnati, the chilly March rain began to fall again in uniform sheets of gray.

* * *

Lisa breathed deeply as she entered the museum. In its tomblike silence, she felt a cocoon of peace settle around her. Glass exhibit cases graced marble floors that were polished to a high sheen and reflected the low light from the recessed wall sconces. She paused to wipe her wet boots carefully on the mat before stepping into her sanctuary. No soggy footsteps would mar these hallowed floors.

Lisa's mind had been starved for stimulation since her last day of high school, five years ago, and she imagined that the museum spoke to her, whispering seductively of things she would never experience: lush, exotic climates, mystery, adventure. She looked forward to going to work each night, despite having spent an exhausting day waiting tables. She loved the domed ceilings with their brilliantly painted mosaics depicting famous sagas. She could describe in vivid detail the most minute nuances of the latest acquisitions. She could recite the placards by heart: each battle, each conquest, each larger-than-life hero or heroine.

When her boots were dry, Lisa hung her slicker by the door and strode briskly past the introductory exhibits, hurrying toward the medieval wing. She brushed her fingers over the plaque outside the entrance, tracing the contours of the gilded letters:

LET HISTORY BE YOUR MAGIC DOORWAY TO THE PAST EXCITING
NEW WORLDS AWAIT YOU

A wry smile curved her lips. She could use a magic doorway to a new world: a world in which she'd been able to attend college when all her high-school friends had scampered off with brand-new luggage to brand-new friends, leaving her behind in the dust of broken hopes and dreams. College? *Bang!* Parties, friends? *Bang, bang!* Parents who would live to see her grow up, perhaps marry? *Bang!*

She glanced at her watch and buried her misery in a burst of activity. Working quickly, she swept and mopped the wing until it was spotless. Dusting the presentations was a pleasure she savored, running her hands over treasures in a way no day guard would have permitted. As was her custom, she saved Director Steinmann's office for last. Not only was he the most meticulous, he often had interesting new acquisitions in his office to be cataloged prior to being placed on display. She could have spent hours wandering the silent museum, studying the weapons, the armor, the legends and battles, but Steinmann had a strict policy that she leave the museum by 5:00 A.M.

Lisa rolled her eyes as she returned books to their slots in the mahogany bookcases that lined his office. Steinmann was a pompous, condescending man. At the conclusion of her interview, she had risen and offered her hand, and Steinmann had stared at it with distaste. Then, his tone pinched with displeasure, he'd informed her that the only evidence he wanted of her nocturnal presence was impeccably clean offices. He'd gone on to remind her of the five o'clock "curfew" so strenuously that she'd felt like Cinderella, certain that Steinmann would turn her into something far worse than a pumpkin should she fail to leave the museum on time.

Despite his rude dismissal, she'd been so elated to get the job that she'd allowed her mom to talk her into going out with Ruby for a belated birthday dinner. Recalling that fiasco, Lisa closed her eyes and sighed. After dinner, Lisa had waited at the bar for change so she and Ruby could play a game of pool. A handsome, well-dressed man had approached her. He'd flirted with her and Lisa had felt special for a few moments. When he'd asked what she did for a living, she'd replied, proudly, that she worked at a museum. He'd pressed her, teasing: Director? Sales? Tour guide?

Night maid, she'd said. And during the day I waitress at First Watch.

He'd made his excuses a moment later and moved away. A flush of humiliation had stained her cheeks as she'd waited at the bar for Ruby to rescue her.

Remembering the slight, Lisa skimmed her dust cloth over the bookshelves and flicked it angrily across the large globe in the corner of the office, upset that the incident still bothered her. She had nothing to be ashamed of; she was a responsible, dedicated person, and she wasn't stupid. Her life had been curtailed by responsibilities that had been thrust on her, and in the final analysis, she felt

she'd handled things pretty well.

Eventually her anger was doused by a wave of the ever-present exhaustion that nervous energy usually kept at bay. Dropping into a chair that faced Steinmann's desk, she caressed the buttery soft leather, relaxing into it. She noticed an exotic-looking chest on the corner of Steinmann's desk. She hadn't seen it before. It was about two feet long and ten inches wide. Fashioned of African ebony buffed to a deep luster, the edges carved with exquisitely detailed knot work, it was obviously a new acquisition. Contrary to Steinmann's customary vigilance, he had not locked it in the glass case where he stored new treasures yet to be cataloged.

Why would he leave such a valuable relic on his desk? Lisa wondered as she closed her eyes. She'd rest just for a minute or two. As she did so, she treated herself to a moment of fantasy: She was a financially independent woman in a beautiful home, and her mother was healthy. She had lovely hand-carved furniture and comfortable chairs. Maybe a boyfriend...

Imagining the perfect place for the lovely ebony chest in her dream home, Lisa drifted off to sleep.

* * *

"You should have called me the moment it arrived," Professor Taylor rebuked.

Steinmann ushered the professor past the exhibits toward his office. "It arrived yesterday, Taylor. It was shipped to us immediately upon excavation. The man who dug it up refused to touch it, he wouldn't even remove it from the ground." Steinmann paused. "There's a curse engraved on the lid of the chest. Although it's in ancient Gaelic, he understood enough of the language to discern its intent. Did you bring gloves?"

Taylor nodded. "And tongs to handle the contents. You haven't opened it?"

"I couldn't find the mechanism that releases the lid," Steinmann said dryly. "Initially, I wasn't certain it would open. It appears to be fashioned of a single piece of wood."

"We'll use the tongs to handle everything, until the lab has a chance to examine it. Where did you say it was found?"

"Buried near a riverbank in the Highlands of Scotland. The farmer who unearthed it was dredging creek rock to build a wall."

"How on earth did you get it out of the country?" Taylor exclaimed.

"The farmer called the curator of a small antiquities firm in Edinburgh who coincidentally owed me a favor."

Taylor didn't press for more information. The transfer of priceless relics to private collections infuriated him, but it would serve no purpose to alienate Steinmann before he got his chance to study the chest. Taylor was obsessed with all things Celtic, and when Steinmann had called him to discuss the unusual medieval piece, Taylor had barely managed to conceal his interest. To reveal it would only give Steinmann power to manipulate him, and any power in the director's hands was a dangerous thing.

"Idiot maid," Steinmann muttered as they entered the wing. "Would you look at that? She left the lights on again." A thin beam of light showed beneath his office door.

Lisa awoke abruptly, uncertain of where she was or what had awakened her. Then she heard men's voices in the hallway outside the office.

Galvanized into action, Lisa leaped to her feet and shot a panicked glance at her watch. It was 5:20 A.M.—she would lose her job! Instinctively she dropped to the floor and took a nasty blow to her temple on the corner of the desk in the process. Wincing, she crawled under the desk as she heard a key in the lock, followed by Steinmann's voice: "It's impossible to get decent help. Worthless maid didn't even lock up. All she had to do was press the button. Even a child could do it."

Lisa curled into a silent ball as the men entered the office. Although the footfalls were cushioned by thick Berber carpet, she heard them approaching the desk.

"Here it is." Steinmann's spotlessly buffed shoes stopped inches from her knees. Lisa drew a cautious, tiny breath and eased her knees back. Steinmann's shoes were joined by a pair of tasseled loafers encrusted with mud from the recent rain. It took every ounce of her willpower not to reach out and pluck the offending bits of sod from the carpet.

"What amazing detail. It's beautiful." The second voice was hushed.

"Isn't it?" Steinmann agreed.

"Wait a minute, Steinmann. Where did you say this chest was found?"

"Beneath a crush of rock near a riverbank in Scotland."

"That doesn't make any sense. How did it remain untouched by the elements? Ebony is obdurate wood, but it isn't impervious to decay. This chest is in mint condition. Has it been dated yet?"

"No, but my source in Edinburgh swore by it. Can you open it, Taylor?" Steinmann said.

There was a rustle of noise. A softly murmured "Let's see... How do you work, you lovely little mystery?"

Beneath the desk, Lisa scarcely dared to breathe as a prolonged silence ensued.

"Perhaps here?" Taylor said finally. "Maybe this little raised square... Ah, I have it! I've seen this before. It's a pressure latch." The chest made a faint popping noise. "It was tightly sealed," he observed. "Look at this, Steinmann. This latching mechanism is brilliant, and do you see the gummy resin that seals the inner channels of wood where the grooves interlock? Don't you wonder how our ancestors managed to create such clever devices? Some of the things I've seen simply defy—"

"Move the fabric and let's see what's under it, Taylor," Steinmann cut him off impatiently.

"But the cloth may disintegrate when handled," Taylor protested.

"We haven't come this far to leave without discovering what's in the chest," Steinmann snapped. "Move the cloth."

Lisa battled an urge to pop out from under the desk, curiosity nearly overriding her common sense and instinct for self-preservation.

There was a long pause. "Well? What is it?" Steinmann asked.

"I have no idea," Taylor said slowly. "I've neither translated tales of it nor seen sketches in my research. It doesn't look quite medieval, does it? It almost looks... why... futuristic," he said uneasily. "Frankly, I'm baffled. The chest is pristine, yet the fabric is ancient, and this"—he gestured at the flask—"is damned odd."

"Perhaps you aren't as much of an expert as you would have me believe, Taylor."

"No one knows more about the Gaels and Picts than I do," he replied stiffly. "But some artifacts simply aren't mentioned in any records. I assure you, I will find the answers."

"And you'll have it examined?" Steinmann said.

"I'll take it with me now—"

"No. I'll call you when we're ready to release it."

There was a pause, then: "You plan to invite someone else to examine it, don't you?" Taylor said. "You question my ability."

"I simply need to get it cataloged, photographed, and logged into our files."

"And logged into someone else's collection?" Taylor said tightly.

"Put it back, Taylor." Steinmann closed his fingers around Taylor's wrist, lowering the flask back to the cloth. He slipped the tongs from Taylor's hand, closed the chest, and placed the tongs beside it. "I brought you here. I'll tell you what I need from you and when. And I'd advise you to stay out of my business."

"Fine," Taylor snapped. "But when you discover no one else knows what it is, you'll be calling me. You can't move an artifact that can't be identified. I'm the only one who can track this thing down and you know it."

Steinmann laughed. "I'll see you out."

"I can find my own way."

"But I'll rest easier knowing I've escorted you," Steinmann said softly. "It wouldn't do to leave such a passionate antiquity worshiper as yourself wandering the museum on his own."

The shoes retreated with muffled steps across the carpet. The click of a key in the lock jarred Lisa into action. *Damn and double damn!* Normally when she left, she depressed the button latch on the door—no lowly maid was entrusted with keys. Steinmann had bypassed the button latch and actually used a key to lock the deadbolt. She jerked upright and banged her head against the underside of the desk. "Ow!" she exclaimed softly. As she clutched the edge and drew herself upright, she paused to look at the chest.

Fascinated, she touched the cool wood. Beautifully engraved, the black wood gleamed in the low light. Bold letters were seared into the top in angry, slanted strokes. What did the chest contain that had perplexed two sophisticated purveyors of antiquities? Despite the fact that she was locked in Steinmann's office and had no doubt that he would return in moments, she was consumed by curiosity. *Futuristic?* Gingerly, she ran her fingers over the chest, seeking the square pressure latch they'd mentioned, then paused. The strange letters on the lid seemed almost to... pulse. A shiver of foreboding raced up her spine.

Silly goose—open it! It can't hurt you. They touched it.

Resolved, she isolated the square and depressed it with her thumb. The lid swung upward with the faint popping sound she'd heard earlier. A flask lay inside, surrounded by dusty tatters of ancient fabric. The flask was fashioned of a silver metal and seemed to shimmer, as if the contents were energized. She cast a nervous glance at the door. She knew she had to get out of the office before Steinmann returned, yet she felt strangely transfixed by the flask. Her eyes drifted from door to flask and back again, but the flask beckoned. It said, *Touch me*, in the same tone all the artifacts in the museum spoke to Lisa. *Touch me while no guards are about, and I will tell you of my history and my legends. I am knowledge...*

Lisa's fingertips curled around the flask.

The world shifted on its axis beneath her feet. She stumbled, and suddenly she...

Couldn't...

Stop...

Falling...

CHAPTER 2

dunnottar, scotland, 1314

WATER SPRAYED LISA'S JEANS-CLAD LEGS FOR THE second time that day as the man surged from the bath. He towered over her, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl.

Lisa blinked incredulously. Once. Twice. And a third time very slowly, giving the apparition time to evaporate. It didn't. The nude giant remained, his fierce expression unwavering, his eyes narrowed. *What on earth had happened to Steinmann's office? He wouldn't fire her if he found her with a nude man—he'd have her arrested!*

Lisa closed her eyes and shifted her feet, cautiously ascertaining that the world was solid beneath her boots again. Only when she was firmly convinced that she stood in Steinmann's office clutching a medieval flask did she open them.

She was *not* in Steinmann's office.

She lost her breath in a great exhalation of astonishment as she looked—really looked—at the man. Droplets of water glistened on his skin. Flames leaped in the hearth behind him, bronzing and shadowing the slopes of his muscles. He was the tallest man she'd ever seen, but his size was not confined to his improbable height. His shoulders were massive, and his broad chest tapered to a lean, muscled abdomen, tight hips, and long, powerful legs.

And he was nude.

She expelled a sigh *of* protest. He could *not* be real. And because he couldn't be real, there was no harm in dropping her gaze for a quick tally of his perfection. A flawlessly proportioned man who didn't really exist was standing naked before her. Where would *any* healthy twenty-three-year-old woman look? She looked.

That sealed it. He couldn't be real. Cheeks flaming, she averted her gaze and faltered back a step.

He roared something at her in a language she didn't understand.

Stealing a glance at his face, she shrugged helplessly, unable to make sense of her situation.

He bellowed again, gesturing angrily. He spoke nonstop in a stream of words for several minutes, waving his arms and glowering.

She watched him, mouth agape, her confusion deepening. It didn't help that the man seemed oblivious to the disconcerting fact that he was gloriously nude. She found her tongue and, with some difficulty, coaxed it into action. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand you. I have no idea what you're saying."

He flinched as if she'd hit him; his dark eyes narrowed and he scowled. If she'd thought he was angry before, that was only because she hadn't yet seen him truly furious. "You are *English!*" he spat, swiftly switching to English, though with a thick, rolling brogue.

Lisa spread her hands as if to say *So what?* What was his point, and why was he so angry with her?

"Doona move!" he roared.

She remained motionless, cataloging him as if he were one of the museum's recent acquisitions, absorbing the incredible length and breadth of his body. The man dripped such intense sexuality that fantasies of a savage warrior, recognizing no law but his own, shivered through her ancestral memory. The danger rolling off him was frightening and seductive. *You're dreaming, remember? You fell asleep and only dreamed you woke up and Steinmann came. But you're still asleep and none of this is really happening.*

She scarcely noticed when the man reached for the weapon propped against the tub. Her mind registered dim amusement that her figment of fancy came replete with avenging sword. Until, with a graceful flick of his wrist, he pointed the deadly weapon at her.

It was her dream, she reminded herself. She could simply ignore the sword. Dreams were penalty-free zones. If she couldn't have a boyfriend in real life, at least she could savor this virtual experience. Smiling, she extended a hand to touch his flawlessly sculpted abdomen—certainly the stuff of dreams—and the tip of the sword grazed her jaw, forcing her eyes to meet his. A girl could get a

kink in her neck from looking that high, she decided.

"Doona think to distract me from my cause," he growled.

"What cause?" she asked, feeling short of breath.

At that moment the door crashed open. A second man, dark haired and clad in a strange wrap of cloth, burst into the room.

"Whatever it is, I doona have time for it now, Galan!" said the man holding the blade to her neck.

The other man looked astounded at the sight of Lisa. "We heard you roar nigh down to the kitchen, Cin."

"Sin?" Lisa echoed disbelievingly. *Oh yes, he is definitely sin. Any man who looks like this must be pure sin.*

"Get out!" Circenn thundered.

Galan hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly retreated from the room and closed the door.

As Lisa's gaze returned to Sin, she looked down again at his improbable endowments.

"Stop *looking* there, woman!"

Her eyes swept up to his. "Nobody looks like you. And no one speaks like you, except maybe Sean Connery in *The Highlander*. See? Proof positive that I'm dreaming. You're a figment of my overtaxed, sleep-deprived, traumatized mind." She nodded firmly.

"I assure you, I am most certainly *not* a dream."

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. Closed them. Opened them. He was still there. "I was in the museum and now I'm in a bedroom with a nude man named Sin? How foolish do you think I am?"

"Circenn. Cir-*cin*," he repeated. "Those who are close to me call me Cin."

"You can't be real."

He had sleepy, hooded eyes so dark that they seemed rimmed by kohl. His nose was strong, arrogant. His teeth—and God knows she was getting a good look at them with all the scowling he was doing—were straight and white enough to make her dentist weep with envy. His forehead was high, and a mane of midnight hair fell to his shoulders. Although none of his features was current model material, except for his sensual lips, the overall effect was that of a savagely beautiful face. *Warrior-lord* was the word perched on her tongue.

The tip of the sword gently poked the soft underside of her chin. When she felt a bead of moisture on her neck, she was amazed by the verisimilitude of her dream. She brushed her fingers over the spot, then gazed at the drop of blood in astonishment.

"Does one bleed in a dream? I've never bled in a dream before," she murmured.

He flicked the baseball cap off her head so quickly that it frightened her. She hadn't even glimpsed the movement of his hand. Her hair rumbled over her shoulders, and she lunged for the cap, only to draw up short on the point of the sword. The top of her head barely reached his chest.

"Give me my cap," she snapped. "Daddy gave it to me."

He regarded her in silence.

"It's all I have from him, and he's dead!" she said heatedly.

Was that a flicker of compassion in his dark eyes?

He extended the cap without a word.

"Thank you," she said stiffly, folding the bill and stuffing it into the back pocket of her jeans. Her gaze dropped to the floor as she pondered the sword at her throat. If it was a dream, she could will things to happen. Or unhappen. Squeezing her eyes shut, she willed the sword to disappear, then swallowed tightly as cold metal bit into her neck. Next, she tried willing the man to disappear; the tub and fire she graciously conceded to keep.

Opening her eyes, she found the man still towering over her.

"Give me the flask, lass."

Lisa's eyebrows rose. "The flask? This is part of the dream? You *see* this?"

"Of course I do! Blinding though your beauty is, I am not a fool!"

My beauty is blinding? Flabbergasted, she handed over the flask.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Lisa sought refuge in formality; it had served her well in the past as a compass through unknown territory. This dream certainly qualified as unknown territory. Never before had she dreamed so lucidly yet been so out of control of the elements of her dream, nor had her subconscious ever before conjured up a man like this. She wanted to know from what prehistoric corner of her soul the leviathan had come.

"Would you mind dressing? Your... er... state of, uh... undress is not conducive to a serious discussion. If you put on some clothes and put down your sword, I'm certain we'll be able to sort things out." She hoped he would find the note of optimism in her voice persuasive.

He scowled as he looked down at his body. Lisa could have sworn that the color in his face deepened as he realized his state of arousal.

"What do you expect of me when you have clad yourself in such a fashion?" he demanded. "I am a man."

As if I've been suffering doubts on that score, she thought wryly. *A dream of a man, no less.*

Snatching a woven blanket of crimson and black, he tossed it over his shoulder so that it draped the front of his body. He grabbed a small pouch, stuffed the flask into it, and finally lowered his sword.

Lisa relaxed and took a few steps back, but as she did so, her hat fell out of her back pocket. She turned around and bent to retrieve it. Turning back to face him, she caught his gaze fixed in the vicinity where her behind, encased in tight jeans, had been only an instant ago. Dumbfounded by the realization that the flawless apparition had been perusing her derriere, she glanced at the fabric he'd wrapped around himself, then cautiously at his face. His dark eyes smoldered. She had a sudden insight that wherever she was, women didn't usually wear jeans. Perhaps

not even trousers.

His jaw tensed and his breathing quickened noticeably. He looked every inch a predator, poised in the heightened alertness that precedes the kill.

"They're all I have!" she said defensively.

He raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I doona wish to discuss it, lass. Not now. Perhaps never."

They looked at each other in measuring silence. Then, for no reason she could define, drawn by a force beyond her ability to resist, she found herself moving toward him. It was *he* who stepped back this time. With one swift ripple of gorgeous muscle, he was out of the room.

The instant the door swung shut, Lisa's legs buckled and she collapsed to her knees, her heart pounding painfully in her chest. The familiar sound of metal sliding across the door told her she was once more locked in. Dear God, she had to wake up.

But somewhere in her heart she had begun to suspect that she was not dreaming.

CHAPTER 3

"SHALL WE REMOVE TEH BODY, CIRCENN?" GALAN asked, when Circenn entered the kitchen.

Circenn drew a quick breath. "The body?" He rubbed his jaw, concealing a wince of anger behind his hand. Nothing was unfolding as he wished. He'd left his chambers, planning to find some cider wine in the kitchen, clear his head in private, and make some decisions—specifically, what to do with the lovely woman he was bound by honor to kill. But he was to be granted no such reprieve. Galan and Duncan Douglas, his trusted friends and advisers, occupied a small table in the kitchen of the keep, watching him intently.

Since either the English or the Scots kept burning down Dunnottar every time it changed hands, the hastily patched ruin of the keep was drafty, cold, and unfinished. They were stationed at Dunnottar only until the Bruce's men relieved them, which was expected any day now, so no further repairs would be made. The Greathall opened to the night sky where the roof should have been, so the kitchen was substituted for the dining hall. Tonight, unfortunately, it was a gathering place as well.

"The bearer of the flask," Galan prodded helpfully.

Circenn scowled. He had hidden the flask in his sporran, hoping for time to resign himself to fulfilling his oath. Several years ago, he'd informed the Douglas brothers of the binding curse he had placed on the chest and of the vow he had sworn to Adam Black. He had felt more comfortable knowing that when it did appear, if for some reason he was unable to fulfill his oath, this trusted pair would see it finished.

But what did one do when oaths were in direct opposition to each other? To Adam, he had sworn to kill the bearer of the flask. Long ago, at his mother's knee, he'd sworn never to harm a woman for any reason.

Galan merely shrugged at Circenn's scowl and said, "I told Duncan she had arrived. I saw the flask in her hand. We have been awaiting its return. Shall we remove the body?"

"That might be a bit awkward. 'The body' is still breathing," Circenn said irritably.

"Why?" Duncan frowned.

"Because I have not yet killed her."

Galan appraised him for a moment. "She *is* lovely, is she not?"

Circenn didn't miss the accusation. "Have I ever allowed loveliness to corrupt my honor?"

"Nay, and I am certain you will not now. You have never broken an oath." Galan's challenge was unmistakable.

Circenn sank into a chair.

At thirty, Galan was the second eldest of the five Douglas brothers. Tall and dark, he was a disciplined warrior who, like Circenn, believed in strict adherence to rules. His idea of a proper battle included months of careful preparation, intense study of the enemy, and a detailed strategy from which they would not waver once the attack was begun.

Duncan, the youngest in the family, held a more nonchalant attitude. Six feet tall, he was ruggedly handsome, always had a day's growth of beard so black that it made his jaw look blue, and his plaid was usually rumpled, hastily knotted, and looked like it was about to slip off. He drew lasses like flies to honey and wholeheartedly availed himself of the fairer sex's attraction to him. Duncan's idea of a proper battle was to wench right up to the last minute, fall out of bed, then dash off with a plaid and a sword and plunge into the melee, laughing all the while. Duncan was a bit unusual, but all the Douglasses were forces to be reckoned with in one way or another. The eldest brother, James, was the Bruce's chief lieutenant and a brilliant strategist.

Galan and Duncan had been Circenn's trusted council for years. They'd warred together, implemented attacks and counterattacks under Robert the Bruce's standard, and trained vigorously for the final battle they prayed would soon liberate Scotland from the English.

"I am not certain I see what harm this woman might do to our cause," Circenn

hedged, cautiously gauging their reaction to his words. Silently, he was gauging his own reaction as well. Usually his rales comforted him, gave him a sense of purpose and direction, but every ounce of his conscience rebelled at the thought of killing the woman abovestairs. He began to tally the possible repercussions of allowing her to live, besides destroying his honor.

Galan laced his fingers together and studied his calluses while speaking. "I scarce think that matters. You swore an oath to Adam Black that you would eliminate the bearer of the flask. While I can see that a woman might evoke sympathy, you have no knowledge of who she really is. She was dressed strangely. Could she be of Druid descent?"

"I think not. I sensed no magic in her."

"Is she English? I was surprised to hear her speak that tongue. We have been speaking English since the Templars arrived, but why does she?"

"Speaking English is not a crime," Circenn said dryly. It was true that since the Templars had arrived they'd been conversing more often in English than in any other tongue. The majority of Circenn's men did not speak French, and most of the Templars did not speak Gaelic, but nearly all of them had learned some English, due to England's far-reaching borders. Circenn found it frustrating that he was unable to use Gaelic—a language he felt was beautiful beyond compare—but he accepted that times were changing and that when men from many different countries came together, English was the most commonly known tongue. It galled him to speak the language of his enemy. "Most of our Templars do not speak Gaelic. That doesn't make them spies."

"She does not speak Gaelic at all?" Galan pressed.

Circenn sighed. "Nay," he said, "she did not understand our tongue, but that alone is insufficient to condemn her. Perhaps she was raised in England. You know many of our clans tread both sides of the border. Besides, it was unlike any English I have ever heard."

"More reason to be suspicious, more reason to dispose of her promptly," Galan said.

"As with any other potential threat, one must first study and assess the extent of

the threat," Circenn equivocated.

"Your oath, Circenn, supersedes all else. Your mind must be on holding Dunnortar and opening the Bruce's path to a secure throne and a liberated Scotland, not on some woman who should be dead even as we speak," Galan reminded him.

"Have I ever failed to live up to my duties in any way?" Circenn held Galan's gaze.

"Nay," Galan admitted. "Not yet," he added.

"Nay," Duncan said easily.

"Then why do you question me now? Have I not far more experience with people, wars, and choices than any of you?"

Galan nodded wryly. "But if you break your vow, how will you explain it to Adam?"

Circenn stiffened. The words *break your vow* lingered uncomfortably in his mind and wove a promise of failure, defeat, and potential for corruption. It was critical that he adhere to his rules. "Let me handle Adam, as I always have," he said coolly.

Galan shook his head. "The men will not like this, should they catch wind of it. You know the Templars are a fierce lot and are particularly wary of women—

"Because they can't have any," Duncan interrupted. "They seek any reason to mistrust women in their effort to keep lustful thoughts at bay. A vow of celibacy is not natural for men; it makes them cold, irritable bastards. I, on the other hand, am always relaxed, even-tempered, and amiable." He flashed a pleasant smile at them both, as if to prove the validity of his theory.

Despite his problems, Circenn's mouth quirked. Duncan had a tendency to behave outrageously, and the more irreverent he was, the more irritated Galan became. Galan never seemed to realize that his younger brother did it on purpose, and the entire time Duncan was acting like an irresponsible youth, his astute Douglas mind wasn't missing a thing going on around him.

"Lack of discipline does not a warrior make, little brother," Galan said stiffly. "You are one extreme and the Templars are the other."

"Wenching does not diminish my battle prowess one whit and you know it," Duncan said, sitting up straighter in his chair, his eyes sparkling in anticipation of the argument to come.

"Enough," Circenn interrupted. "We were discussing my oath and the fact that I am forsworn to kill an innocent woman."

"You doona know she is innocent," Galan protested.

"I doona know she is *not*," Circenn said. "Until I have some indication of guilt or innocence, I—" He broke off and sighed heavily. He found it nearly impossible to say the next words.

"You what?" Duncan asked, watching him with fascination. When Circenn didn't reply, he pushed, "Will you refuse to kill her? Will you break a forsworn oath?" Duncan's incredulity was etched all over his handsome face.

"I didn't say that," Circenn snapped.

"You didn't *not* say it," Galan said warily. "I would appreciate it if you would clarify your intentions. Do you plan to kill her or not?"

Circenn rubbed his jaw again. He cleared his throat, trying to form the words his conscience demanded he say, but the warrior in him resisted.

Duncan's eyes narrowed as he regarded Circenn thoughtfully. After a moment, he glanced at his brother. "We know what Adam is like, Galan. His way has oft been swift, unnecessary destruction, and enough blameless lives have been taken in the quest to secure the throne. I propose Circenn take the time to discover who the woman is and whence she comes prior to passing sentence. I cannot speak for you, Galan, but I doona wish the blood of another innocent on my hands, and if we urge him to kill her, the deed becomes ours as well. Besides, recall that although Circenn swore to kill the bearer of the flask, nothing in his oath addressed timeliness. He might wait twenty years to kill her without breaking his oath."

Circenn glanced up at Duncan's last words, surprised. He hadn't considered that

possibility. In truth, his oath had not contained one word specifying how swiftly he must kill the bearer of the flask—hence it was neither amoral nor a violation of his oath to refrain for a short time in order to study the person. One might even argue that it was wise, he decided. *You split hairs with a battle-ax*. Adam's words, from six years ago, surfaced in Circenn's mind to mock him.

"But you had best be aware," Galan warned, "that if you doona kill her, and should any of the Templars discover who she is and the nature of the oath you swore, the knights will lose faith in your ability to lead. They will see a vow broken as an unforgivable weakness. The only reason they agreed to fight for our country is because of you. Sometimes I think they would follow you into hell. You know they are fanatic in their beliefs. To them, there is no justification for breaking an oath. Ever."

"Then we will not tell them who she is or what I swore, will we?" Circenn said softly, knowing the brothers would support his decision whether they agreed with it or not. The Douglasses always stood behind the laird and thane of Brodie—an ancient blood oath had united the two clans long ago.

The brothers studied him, then nodded. "It will remain between us until you reach your decision."

* * *

Breathing deeply of the crisp, cool air, Circenn paced the courtyard while the woman waited in his chambers for mercy that was not his to grant. He struggled to harden himself against her. He had lived so long by the rules that he almost hadn't heard his conscience clamor when he'd raised his sword to her neck. While his warrior's training had insisted he honor the vow, a thing he had thought dead in him had undermined his resolution.

Compassion. Sympathy. And an insidious little voice that had softly, but relentlessly, questioned the sagacity of his rules. He had recognized that voice; it was doubt—a thing he hadn't suffered for an eternity.

I swear to kill the bearer of the flask, he had pledged years ago.

A warrior's oaths were his lifeblood, an unbreakable code by which he lived and died. Circenn Brodie's rules were the only thing standing between him and a swift descent into chaos and corruption. What was the solution?

She must die.

She.

By Dagda, how could it be a woman? Circenn liked women; he had adored his mother and treated all women with the same deference and courtesy. He felt women exhibited some of the best characteristics of humanity. Circenn was Brude, whose line of royal succession was matrilineal. Years ago, when Circenn had sworn his oath to Adam Black, he had not once considered that the flask might be found by a woman, and such a delightful one at that. When he'd torn the strange bonnet from her head, her thick hair had cascaded nearly to her waist in a fall of copper and gold highlights. Green eyes, uptilted at the outer corners, had widened with fear, then quickly narrowed with anger as she'd pronounced the bonnet a gift from her da. It was only fitting that he return the family heirloom, no matter how ugly it was.

Unusually tall for a woman, and lithe, her breasts were full and firm, and he had glimpsed the press of her nipples against the thin fabric of her strange garment. Her legs were generously long—long enough to wrap around his waist and permit her to comfortably cross her ankles while he buried himself between them. When she had bent to retrieve her bonnet he'd nearly snaked an arm around her waist, pulled her against him, and let his demanding nature take free reign. *And then slit her throat when your desire was sated?*

She. Had Adam suspected that the bearer of the flask might be a female? Might he have seen into the future with his fairy vision and even now be laughing at his dilemma? Yet, if he hadn't used a binding curse in the first place, the woman's life wouldn't be in danger now. It was his inept curse that had brought her here, and now he was supposed to kill the unsuspecting soul. Unless he found some proof of duplicity on her part, her death would be innocent blood on his hands that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Circenn girded his will, conceding that the best solution was to kill her. He would fulfill his oath; then, come tomorrow, life would be normal again. He would secure the flask in the secret place with the other hallows and continue their war. He would return to his tidy regimen and find solace in knowing that he would never become the abomination he so feared he had the potential to be.

Circenn Brodie's primary goal was to see the Bruce securely on the throne of

Scotland.

Upon the English king Longshanks' death, his son Edward II had continued his father's war, relentlessly chipping away at Scotland's heritage. Soon nothing of their unique culture would remain. They would be Britons: weak and obedient, taxed into starvation and submission. Their greatest hope against the ruthless king of England was the renegade Templars who had sought sanctuary at Castle Brodie.

Circenn blew out a breath of frustration. The persecution of the Templars grieved and infuriated him. He had once considered joining the renowned Order of warrior-monks, but some of their rules hadn't been quite to his taste. He'd settled instead for working closely with the religious knights, since both he and the Order protected hallowed artifacts of immense value and power. Circenn respected the Order's many causes, and knew its history as well as any Templar.

The Order had been founded in 1118 when a group of nine predominantly French knights had gone to Jerusalem and petitioned King Baudouin to allow them to live in the ancient ruin of the Temple of Solomon. In exchange, the nine knights had offered their services to protect pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land from robbers and murderers along the public highways leading into Jerusalem. In 1128, the Pope had given his official approval to the Order.

The knights had been handsomely paid for their services, and the Order had increased dramatically in numbers, wealth, and power through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the fourteenth century, the Order owned over nine thousand manors and castles across Europe. Independent of royal or episcopal control, the Order's profits were free of taxation. The Order's many estates were farmed, producing revenues that served as the basis for the largest financing system in Europe. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Parisian Order of the Templars virtually functioned as the French Royal Treasury, lending large sums to European royalty and individual nobles. However, as the Templars' wealth and power increased, so did the suspicion and jealousy among some members of the nobility.

Circenn hadn't been surprised when the Order's success became the very reason for its downfall. He'd anticipated it, yet been helpless to prevent it; the politics of Pope and king were too mighty for one man to influence.

Circenn recalled well how, nearly a dozen years past, the Templars' wealth had drawn the deadly attention of the French king, Philippe the Fair, who was desperate to line his coffers. In 1305, Philippe maligned the Order, convincing Pope Clement V that the Templars were not holy defenders of the Catholic faith, but rather seeking to destroy it.

Philippe campaigned exhaustively against the knights, and accused the Templars of heinous acts of heresy and sacrilege. In 1307, the Pope gave the king the order he'd been waiting for: the right to arrest all the Templars in France, to confiscate their properties, and to direct an inquisition. So the infamous, bloody, and biased trial of the Templars had begun.

Circenn ran a hand through his hair and scowled. Knights had been arrested, imprisoned, and forced through torture to confess to sins of Philippe's choosing. Even more had been burned at the stake. In trial, the knights had been permitted no defense advocates; they had not even been allowed to know the names of their accusers and witnesses against them. The so-called "trial" had been a witch-hunt, deviously orchestrated to strip the Templars of their fabulous riches.

Adding insult to injury, the Pope had issued a papal bull that suppressed the Order and denied it recognition. The few knights who managed to escape imprisonment or death had become outcasts, without country or home.

When Circenn had realized the knights' downfall was inevitable, he had hastened to meet with Robert the Bruce and, with Robert's approval, had sent word to the Order that they would be welcomed in Scotland. Robert had offered them sanctuary, and in return, the powerful warrior-monks had turned their fighting skills to the battle against England.

The Templars were formidable warriors, trained in weaponry and strategy, and they were essential to Scotland's cause. Over the past few years, Circenn had been stealthily slipping them into the Bruce's troops as commanders, with the Bruce's assent. Already the Scots were warring better, implementing cunning strategies, and winning minor battles.

Circenn knew that if he faltered now, if he began to break oaths or did anything that jeopardized the Templar's loyalty, he might as well throw away the past ten years of his life, along with his love for his motherland.

Lisa had no idea how much time had passed since she'd sat on the floor. But it was long enough for her to realize that time didn't pass in such a fashion for dreamers. If one sat still in a dream and did nothing, the dream either ended or moved on to some new and incredible adventure colored by shades of the absurd. *Absurd like the proportions of that man's body*, she thought irritably.

Pushing herself up from the floor with her hands, she paused in a crouch, observing the wide, flat stones beneath her palms. Cool. Hard. Dry, with a skimming of stone dust. *Entirely* too tangible. Rising to her feet, she began to examine her surroundings.

The chamber was large, lit by fat, soapy candles. The walls, fashioned of massive stone blocks, were hung with random tapestries. A huge bed occupied the center of the room, and several chests were scattered about with neatly folded fabrics piled atop them. The room was spartan, tidy. The fireplace was the only concession to atmosphere; there was not a single woman's touch in the room. Pausing near the bathtub, she dipped her hand in the water; tepid—another sensation too tangible to deny.

She moved to the fireplace and flinched at the confoundingly real sensation of warmth. She studied the flames a moment, marveling that the rest of the room was so chilly when the hearth was throwing off such a blaze. It was as if the fire were the sole source of heat, she thought. Struck by that notion, she briskly walked the perimeter of the room. Her suspicion was quickly confirmed: There was not one heating vent in the entire chamber. No radiators in the corners collecting dust. No little metal vents in the floors. No pipes or, for that matter, a single electrical outlet. No phone jack. No closets. The door was made of what looked like solid oak; no hollow-core veneer there.

She took a deep, calming breath and assured herself that she must have overlooked something, at least in terms of the heating. Circling the room a second time, she surveyed every nook and cranny as she trailed her hand along the wall—another way of testing the solidity of her prison. Her fingertips brushed a thick tapestry that yielded beneath them and felt far colder than the stones. The rough fabric shivered beneath her palm as if the wind were batting at it from the other side. Mystified, she tugged it aside.

She lost her breath in a sudden rush of air. The view from the window struck her as intensely as an unexpected blow to her stomach.

She gazed out upon a misty night from ancient history.

Fifty feet above the ground, she was in a stone castle that stood on an island promontory surrounded by a thundering sea. Waves hurled themselves at the rocky crags, breaking into foam and becoming one with the mist that swirled up from the black surface of the ocean. On a cobbled walkway, men carrying torches moved silently between the castle and small outbuildings. The distant cry of a wolf competed with faint strains of bagpipes. The night sky was blue-black, tinted purple where it met the water, dancing with thousands of stars and a thin scythe of a moon. She'd never seen so many constellations in Cincinnati; smog and the halo effect of the brilliantly lit city dimmed such beauty. The view from the window was breathtakingly stark, majestic. A bitter wind howled up from the sea and across the promontory, buffeting the tapestry in her hand.

She dropped it as if she'd been burned and it fell across the window, blessedly sealing out the inexplicable vista. Unfortunately, as her eyes focused on the tapestry, she discovered a new horror. It was brilliantly woven and far too detailed: a warrior riding a horse into battle while an army of men clad in bloodstained plaid cheered. At the bottom of the hanging, embroidered in crimson, were four numbers that chipped away at her sanity: 1314.

Lisa moved to the bed and sank limply onto it, her energy sapped by the successive shocks. She stared blankly at the bed for a moment, then her hand flashed out and poked frantically at the mattress as she tested another part of her environment. *Not your run-of-the-mill Serta Sleeper*

here, Lisa. Filled with a growing sense of panic, she pulled back the tightly tucked blankets and was momentarily sidetracked by the fragrance that clung to the linens. *His* scent: spice, danger, and man.

Firmly ignoring a desire to bury her nose in the sheets, she tugged at the mattress, which was little more than thin pallets laid atop one another encased in bristly fabric. One crunched like dried brush, the next seemed stuffed with lumpy woolly stuff, and the top had the feel of limp feathers. For the next twenty minutes Lisa scrutinized her surroundings, driven by increasing desperation. The stones felt cool, the fire felt hot. The liquid in the cup near the bed tasted vile. She heard the bagpipes. Every sense she possessed was activated by her tests. Absently, she swiped at her neck with the back of her hand, and when she drew it away a single drop of blood lay crimson upon her skin.

She understood with sudden certainty that she should never have touched the flask. Although it defied rational explanation, she was neither in Cincinnati nor in the twenty-first century. She felt the last of her hope that she was dreaming slip from her tenuous grasp. Dreams she knew well. But this was too real to be a dream, detailed far beyond her mind's ability to fabricate.

Give me the flask, he'd demanded.

You see this? This is part of the dream? She'd been astonished.

But now, reflecting upon it, she realized that he'd seen it because it was *not* part of a dream. It was part of reality, his reality, a reality she now shared. That it was the flask she had touched just before she'd started to feel like she was falling, and the flask that he'd demanded, seemed too logical a connection to exist within a dream. Had the flask somehow carried her back to a man who had direct or indirect proprietary rights to it? And if so, was she truly in the fourteenth century?

With growing horror, she saw the frightening pattern: His odd manner of dress, his intent perusal of her clothing as if he'd never seen the like before, the primitive wooden tub situated before the fire, the strange language he'd spoken, the tapestry on the wall. All of it hinted at the impossible.

Stricken, she glanced around the room, reassessing it from a different perspective. She viewed it as her employment in the museum had led her to believe a medieval chamber would appear.

And all the oddities made perfect sense.

Logic insisted she was in a medieval stone castle, and according to the wall hanging, at some point in the fourteenth century, despite the improbability of it.

Lisa blew her breath out in a frantic attempt to calm down. She couldn't be somewhere else in time, because if this was medieval Scotland, Catherine was some seven hundred years in the future—alone. Her mother desperately needed her and had no one else to rely on. That was unacceptable. Being stuck in a strange dream was now relegated to the minor problem it would have been, had it been true. A dream would have been easy to manage; eventually she would have awakened, no matter how awful things had been in the dream. If she was

actually *in* the past, which was what all her senses insisted, she *had* to get back home.

But how?

Would touching the flask do it again? As she pondered that possibility she heard footsteps in the corridor outside the chamber. She moved quickly to the door, debated cowering behind it, then pressed her ear to it instead. It would be wise to discover everything she could about her environment.

"Do you think he'll do it?" a voice echoed in the hall.

There was a long silence, then a sigh so loud that it carried through the thick wood. "I believe so. He does not take oaths lightly and knows the woman must die. Nothing can come in the way of our cause, Duncan. Dunnottar must be held, that bastard Edward must be defeated, and oaths sworn must be honored. He will kill her."

As the steps faded down the corridor, Lisa leaned limply against the door. There was no doubt in her mind exactly which woman they'd meant.

Dunnottar? Edward? Dear God! She hadn't merely traveled through time—she'd been dropped smack into the sequel to Braveheart!

CHAPTER 4

IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT WHEN CIRCENN QUIETLY EASED his chamber door open a few inches. Peering through the narrow aperture, he saw that the room was dark. Only a faint bar of moonlight fell from behind the tapestry. She must be sleeping, he decided, which would give him the advantage of surprise. He would get this over with, quickly.

He swung the door open, stepped into the room with swift conviction, and promptly lost his footing. As he hit the floor of his chamber, he cursed; it had been cunningly littered with sharp pieces of broken stoneware. He scarcely had time to register that he'd tripped over a taut and cleverly tied cord, when he was smashed on the back of his head with a stoneware basin. "By Dagda, lass!" he roared, rolling over on his side and clutching his head. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Of course I am!" she hissed.

Circenn could discern nothing more than a blur of motion in the darkness when, much to his astonishment and pain, she kicked him in a most sensitive part of his body—a part most women touched reverently. When he doubled over, his hands grazed more of the jagged shards on the floor, and he winced. She leaped over his body like a frightened doe, bounding for the open doorway.

Deadening himself to the pain, he moved swiftly. His hand flashed out and fastened on her ankle. "Leave this room and you are dead," he said flatly. "My men will kill you the moment they see you."

"So what's the difference? You will too!" she cried. "Let go of me!" She kicked ineffectually at the hand clasped around her ankle.

He growled and banged the door shut with his foot. Then, pulling on her ankle, he caused her to lose her balance and brought her crashing down on top of him. He'd tried to roll her toward him as she fell to keep her from striking any of the stoneware she'd so deviously strewn about, but she bucked as she hit him and bounced over his side. A grapple ensued and she fought him with a surprising amount of courage and strength. Aware of his superior brawn, he focused his efforts on subduing her without hurting her or allowing her to harm herself. If

anyone was going to be harming her, it was he.

They wrestled in silence, except for his grunts when she landed a particularly painful shot and her gasps when he finally captured her hands and held them above her head and stretched her on her back on the floor. His grasp nearly slipped when his hand closed around a band of metal on her wrist. As he forcefully restrained her arms, it slipped off and he closed his fist over it, then placed it in his sporran for later inspection—it might yield clues to her identity. He deliberately let the full weight of his body settle atop hers, knowing she would not be able to breathe. *Submit*, he willed silently as she bucked against him, trying to win her freedom. "I am stronger than you, lass. Cede this battle to me. Doona be foolish."

"And let you kill me? Never! I heard your men." She panted, trying to draw air into her lungs while crushed beneath his weight.

Circenn scowled. So that was why she'd laid a trap for him. She must have overheard Galan and Duncan as they'd retired to their rooms; they'd obviously said something about his killing her. He'd have to speak with those two about discretion, perhaps encourage them to revert to Gaelic while within the walls of the keep. He suffered a momentary lapse in concentration while admiring her resourcefulness, and she exploited it by bashing her forehead into his chin, and it *hurt*. He shook her forcefully and was astonished when the woman didn't yield, but tried to head butt him again.

She showed no signs of giving up the fight, and he realized that she would beat at him until she passed out from lack of breath. Since the only part of their respective bodies they both had free were their heads, he did the only thing he could think of—he kissed her. It would be impossible for her to head butt him with her lips pressed against his, and he'd learned long ago that the best way to control a fight was to get as far into his enemy's space as possible. It took nerves of steel to handle six feet and seven inches of ruthless Brodie a breath away from one's heart.

While congratulating himself for the inventive strategy he'd employed to keep her from hitting him with the only part of her body she could move, he acknowledged his attempt at self-deceit. He had wanted to kiss her since the moment she'd materialized in front of his bath—yet another violation of his careful rules. He knew that physical intimacy with this woman might skew his

impartiality. But their skirmish had brought him into contact with every inch of her body, her curves were pressed against his hard length as if they were naked together, and her fierce, intelligent ambush had aroused him even more than her beauty had.

He had the scent of her in his nostrils: fear and woman and fury. It made him rock hard.

He sought to subdue her with his kiss, to make her understand his complete dominance, but the crush of her breasts beneath his chest heated him, and he found himself plunging his tongue between her lips with the intention of seducing rather than conquering. He sensed the moment when his kisses stopped being his way of controlling her and became nothing but a savage desire to indulge his appetite for the woman. All he need do was push aside his plaid, peel off her strange trousers, and push himself inside her. The temptation was exquisite.

His breathing quickened, sounding harsh to his own ears. It had been too long since he'd been with a woman, and his body was tightly strung. He angled himself away, drawing back to stop the painful press of his arousal against the cradle of her hips.

When she went motionless beneath him, he girded his will. Loath to lose the fullness of her lower lip, he sucked it hard as he drew away. He gazed down at her; her eyes were closed, her lashes dark fans against her cheeks.

"Are you going to kill me now?" she whispered.

Circenn stared at her, conflicting directives warring within him. In their tussle, he'd freed his dirk, and now he laid it against her throat. One swift plunge and it would be over. Brief, merciful, simple. His oath would be fulfilled, and there would be naught to do but remove the lass with the torn neck and forever-silenced heart and return to his carefully orchestrated world. Her eyes widened in alarm as she felt the chill metal brush against her skin.

He made the mistake of gazing into them. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. *Cut*, he ordered himself, but his fingers didn't so much as tense around the handle of the short knife. *Cut!* he raged at himself. Perversely, his body hardened against her, and he felt a sudden wave of desire to drop the knife and kiss her

again.

Kill her now! he commanded himself.

Not a finger flinched. The knife lay useless against her skin.

"I can't die now," she whispered. "I haven't even *lived* yet."

The muscles in his arm recognized defeat before his mind did. There were no other words she could have said that would have dismayed him more. *I haven't even lived yet*. An eloquent plea to taste what life had to offer, and, whether she realized it or not, quite revealing. It told him much about her.

His arm relaxed, and he removed the knife from her throat with far greater ease than he'd placed it there. He muttered a curse as he flung it across the room and it sank into the door with a satisfying sound.

"Nay, lass, I will not kill you." *Not tonight*, he appended silently. He would question her, study her, determine her involvement. Judge her: guilty or innocent. If he found evidence of subterfuge or a shallow and avaricious personality, his blade would easily find the mark, he assured himself. "I need to ask you some questions. If I let you up, will you sit quietly on the bed and answer me?"

"Yes. I can't breathe," she added. "Hurry."

Circenn shifted so his weight was not resting fully on her. He allowed her to regain her freedom in regulated stages so she understood that he was giving it to her. It was neither a freedom she had earned nor one she could ever hope to take. He granted her passage, permitted her range of motion. It was imperative she understand that his control over her was absolute.

Despite his uncomfortable state of arousal, he forced her to keep close contact as she slipped her body from beneath his. It was a purely male show of dominance. He scarcely gave her room enough to find her knees beneath her. He leaned back minutely so she was forced to falter to her feet by clutching his shoulders, which put her lips a mere breath away from his. He would be all over her, until she acquiesced to his dictates.

She kept her gaze defiantly averted, refusing to look at him while she used his

body to pull herself up. *Had you met my gaze, lass, I would have pushed you farther*, he thought, for had she still possessed enough defiance to meet his eyes he would have provoked submission some other way. He rose in tandem with her so their bodies touched at many contact points, and didn't miss her swift intake of breath when he deliberately shifted so her breasts brushed against his abdomen. He backed her to the bed and, with one gentle push, seated her upon it.

Then he turned his back on her as if she were nothing, no threat, insignificant. Another lesson she must learn—he had nothing to fear from her. He could turn his back on her with impunity. His movement had the secondary boon of giving him time to quell his desire. He took several deep breaths, bolted the door from the inside, and whipped his dirk from the wood and slapped it into his boot. He lit tapers before turning back to face her. By then he was breathing evenly and his plaid was carefully bunched at the front. She didn't need to know what toll their enforced closeness had taken on him.

She had buried her face in her hands and her coppery hair slipped in a glossy fall across her knees. He reminded himself not to look at her long legs in those revealing trousers. Scarcely concealed by the pale blue fabric, a man could follow the slim line of her ankles over muscled calves and up shapely thighs to the vee of her woman's privacy. Those trousers could seduce a Templar Grand Master.

"Who are you?" he began quietly. He would continue in a gentle voice until she demonstrated resistance. Then he might roar at her. With a small measure of amusement, he conceded the probability that this lass would roar back. "My name is Lisa," she murmured into her palms. A good start, obedient and swift. "Lisa, I am Circenn Brodie. Would that we had met under different circumstances, but we did not, and we must make the best of it. Where did you find *my* flask?"

"In the museum where I work," she said in a monotone. "What is a museum?"

"A place that displays treasures and artifacts."

"My flask was on display? For people to see?" he asked indignantly. *Hadn't the curse worked?*

"No. It had just been found and was still in the chest. It hadn't been placed on

display yet." She didn't raise her head from her hands.

"Ah, so the chest had not been opened. You were the first one to touch it."

"No, two men touched it before I did."

"You saw them touch it—truly touch the flask?" She was silent for a long moment. "Oh my God, the tongs!" she exclaimed. Her head shot up and she stared at him with an expression of horror. "No. I didn't actually see them touch it. But there was a pair of tongs lying next to the chest. I'll bet Steinmann and his cohort never touched the chest or the flask at all! Is that what did this to me—touching the flask? I *knew* I shouldn't have pried into business that wasn't mine."

"This is very important, lass. You must answer me truthfully. Do you know what the flask contains?"

She gave him a look of utter innocence. She was either the consummate actress or was telling the truth. "No. What?"

Actress or innocent? He rubbed his jaw while he scrutinized her. "Where are you from, lass? England?"

"No. Cincinnati."

"Where is that?"

"In the United States."

"But you speak English."

"Our people fled from England several hundred years ago. Once, my countrymen were English. Now we call ourselves American."

Circenn regarded her blankly. A look of sudden revelation crossed her face, and he wondered at it.

"That was silly of me. Of course you couldn't possibly understand. The United States is far across the sea from Scotland," she said. "We didn't like England either, so I can empathize," she said reassuringly. "You've probably never heard of my land, but I'm from very far away and it's imperative that I get back. Soon."

When he shook his head, her jaw tightened, and Circenn felt a flash of admiration; the lass was a fighter to the last. He suspected that if he had attempted to kill her, there would have been no pleas from her lips but vows of vengeance to the bitter finale. "I am afraid I cannot send you back just now."

"But you *can* send me back at some point? You know how?" She held her breath, awaiting his reply.

"I am certain we can manage," he said noncommittally. If she was from a land across the sea, and if he could find a way to accept not killing her, he could surely find a ship to put her on, if it was decided that she could be released. The fact that she was from so far away might make it easier for him to free her, because it was doubtful her homeland had any interest in Scotland; and once she was gone, perhaps he could force himself to forget he'd broken a rule. Out of sight might well be out of mind. Her appearance in the keep could truly have been a vast mistake. But how had his chest gotten to a land so far away? "How did your museum obtain my chest?"

"They send people all over looking for unusual treasures—"

"Who are they?" he asked quickly. Perhaps she was innocent, but perhaps the men she'd mentioned were not.

"My employers." Her gaze flickered to his, then away.

He narrowed his eyes and studied her thoughtfully. Why had she averted her gaze? She seemed to be making a genuine effort to communicate with him. Although he saw no sign of outright deception, he sensed strong emotions in her; there were things she was not saying. As he pondered the direction of his inquisition, she stunned him by saying "So how do you send me through time? Is it magic?"

Circenn released a soft whistle. *By Dagda, how far had this lass come?*

CHAPTER 5

LISA SAT ON THE BED ANXIOUSLY AWAITING HIS REPLY. She found it difficult to look at him, partly because he frightened her and partly because he was so damn beautiful. How was she supposed to think of him as the enemy when her body—without even briefly consulting her mind—had already decided to like him? She'd never felt such a visceral, instant attraction. Lying beneath his overwhelming body, she'd been flooded with a frantic sexual desire that she'd hastily attributed to fear of dying; she'd read somewhere that happened sometimes.

She forced herself to remain motionless so she would betray neither the panic she felt nor her unacceptable fascination with him. In the past few minutes she'd been transported from fear and rage that her life might end so inauspiciously, to astonishment when he'd kissed her. Now she settled into wary numbness.

She realized—the man had some seriously intimidating body language—that he was in complete control, and unless she could catch him unaware, she didn't have a chance of escaping. She had already blown her best opportunity to catch him off guard when she'd ambushed him at the door. He was well over six-and-a-half-feet tall, more massive than any professional football player she'd ever seen, and she wouldn't have been surprised if he weighed in at three-hundred-plus pounds of solid muscle. This man didn't miss a thing; he was a natural-born predator and warrior, scrutinizing her every move and expression. She fancied that he could smell her emotions. Didn't animals attack when they scented fear?

"I see I must approach this from a different angle, lass. *When* are you from?"

She forced herself to look at him. He'd lowered himself to the floor and was leaning back against the door, his powerful bare legs outstretched in front of him. The jeweled handle of his knife protruded from his boots. There was blood trickling down his temple and his lower lip was swollen. When he wiped absently at it with the back of his hand, tendons and muscles rippled in his forearm. "You're bleeding." The inane comment slipped from her mouth. *And wearing a tartan*, she marveled. An actual plaid, woven of crimson and black, draped about his body, carelessly revealing much more than it concealed.

The corner of his lip curved. "Imagine that," he mocked. "I was ambushed by a

spitting banshee and now I am bleeding. I was tripped, bashed in the head, rolled over broken stoneware, head butted, *kicked* in the—"

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

"You were trying to kill me," Lisa said defensively. "How dare you get mad at me when I was mad at you first? *You* started it."

He ran an impatient hand through his hair. "Aye, and now I am ending it. I told you I have decided not to kill you for the moment, but I require information from you. I have fifty men outside this door"—he gestured over his shoulder with a thumb—"who will need reasons to trust you and let you live. Although I am the laird here, I cannot keep you safe all the time if I doona give my men plausible reasons why you are not a threat."

"Why do any of you want to kill me in the first place?" Lisa asked. "What have I done?"

"I am in charge of this inquiry, lass." With deliberate leisure, he folded his arms across his chest.

Lisa had no doubt that he'd struck the pose to make a point. It made all the muscles in his arms bunch and reminded her how small she was compared to him, even at five feet ten inches. She'd just learned another lesson: He could be courteous, even demonstrate a droll sense of humor, but he was always deadly, always in command. "Right," she said tightly. "But it might help if I understood why you consider me a threat to begin with."

"Because of what is in the flask."

"What's in it?" she asked, then berated herself for her incessant curiosity. Unchecked curiosity had created this situation.

"If you doona know, your innocence will protect you. Doona ask me again."

Lisa blew out a nervous breath.

"When are you from?" he asked softly, circling back to his initial question.

"The twenty-first century."

He blinked and cocked his head. "You expect me to believe you are from a time seven hundred years from now?"

"You expect *me* to believe that I'm in the fourteenth century?" she said, unable to conceal a note of peevishness in her voice. *Why did he expect such madness to be any easier for her to deal with?*

A quick smile flashed across his face, and she breathed more easily, but then the smile vanished and he was again the remote savage. "This conversation is not about you, lass, or what you think or what you believe. It is about me, and whether I can find a reason to trust you and let you live. Your being from the future and your feelings about being here mean nothing to me. It is irrelevant where or when you are from. The fact is that you are here now and you have become my problem. And I doona like problems."

"So send me home," she said in a small voice. "That should solve your problem." She flinched as his intense gaze fixed on her face. His dark eyes latched on to hers and for a space of time unmeasured, she couldn't look away.

"If you are from the future, who is Scotland's king?" he asked silkily.

She drew a cautious breath. "I'm afraid I don't know, I've never followed politics," she lied. She certainly wasn't about to tell a warrior who was fighting over kings and territories that seven hundred years from now Scotland *still* didn't have a recognized king. She might not have a college degree, but she wasn't a complete fool.

His eyes narrowed and she suffered the uncanny sensation that he was gauging far more than her facial expressions. Finally he said, "I accept that. Few women follow politics. But perhaps you know your history?" he encouraged softly.

"Do you know *yours* from seven hundred years ago?" Lisa evaded, quickly intuiting where he was headed. He would want to know who won what battle and who fought where and the next thing she knew she'd be all tangled up in screwing up the future. If she really was in the past, she was not going to participate in instigating world chaos.

"Much of it," he said arrogantly.

"Well, I don't. I'm just a woman," she said with as much guilelessness as she could muster.

He regarded her appraisingly and the corner of his lip lifted in a half-smile. "Ah, lass, you are decidedly not 'just' a woman. I suspect it would be a vast mistake to deem you *merely* anything. Have you a clan?"

"What?"

"To which clan do you belong?" When she didn't answer, he said, "Do you have clans in Cincinnati?"

"No," Lisa said succinctly. He certainly didn't have to worry about someone trying to rescue her; she hardly had a family anymore. Hers was a clan of two, and one was dying.

He made an impatient gesture with his hands. "Your clan name, lass. That is all I am after. Lisa what?"

"Oh, you want to know my last name! Stone. Lisa Stone."

His eyes widened incredulously. "Like rock? Or boulder?" No half-smile this time: A full grin curved his lips, and the impact was devastating.

Her fingers itched with the urge to smack it off. *Enemy*, she reminded herself. "No! Like Sharon Stone. The famous actress," she added at his blank look.

His eyes narrowed. "You descend from a line of actresses?" he demanded.

What on earth had she said wrong? "No." She sighed. "That was my attempt at a joke, but it wasn't funny because you don't know who I meant. My last name *is* Stone, though."

"How foolish do you think I am?" he echoed the exact words she'd said to him about his name only hours ago. "Lisa Rock? That will not do. I can hardly present you to my men, should I decide to, as Lisa Stone. I may as well tell them you are Lisa Mud or Lisa Straw. Why would your people take the name of a stone?"

"It's a perfectly respectable name," she said stiffly. "I've always thought it a strong name, like me: capable of enduring calamity, mighty and able. Stones

have a certain majesty and mystery. You should know that, being from Scotland. Aren't your stones sacred?"

He mulled over her words a moment and nodded. "There is that. I had not considered it as such, but aye, our stones are beautiful and treasured monuments to our heritage. Lisa Stone it is. Did your museum say where they found my chest?" he coolly resumed his inquisition.

Lisa reflected, trying to recall the discussion she'd overheard as she'd hidden beneath Steinmann's desk. "Buried in some rocks near a riverbank in Scotland."

"Ah, it begins to make sense," he murmured. "It did not occur to me when I cursed it that if my chest went undiscovered for centuries, the person who touched it would have to travel through both terrain and time." He shook his head. "I have little patience for this cursing business."

"It would also seem you have little aptitude for it." The words tumbled from her mouth before she could stop them.

"It worked, did it not?" he said stiffly.

Shut up, Lisa, she warned herself, but her tongue paid no heed. "Well, yes, but you can't judge something simply by its outcome. The end does not necessarily justify the means."

He smiled faintly. "My mother was inclined to say that."

Mother:

Lisa closed her eyes. God, how she wished she could keep them closed and maybe it would all go away. No matter how fascinating this was, how gorgeous he was, she had to get out of there. Even as they spoke, somewhere in the future the night nurse was being relieved by the day nurse, and her mother would have expected her home hours ago. Who would check her medicines to be certain the nurses had gotten the doses right? Who would hold her hand while she slept so if she slipped away she wouldn't die alone? Who would cook her favorite foods to tempt her appetite? "Curse me back," she pleaded.

He regarded her intently and she again suffered the sensation of being examined on a deeper level. His gaze was a nearly tangible pressure. After a long silence

he said, "I cannot send you back, lass. I doona know how."

"What do you *mean* you don't know how?" she exclaimed. "Wouldn't touching the flask do it?"

He jerked his head in a sharp gesture of negation. "That is not the flask's power. Traveling through time—if indeed you did—was an incidental part of the curse. I doona know how to send you back home. When you said you were from across the sea, I thought I could put you on a ship and sail you home, but your home is seven hundred years from happening."

"So curse something *else* to send me back!" she cried.

"Lass, it does not work like that. Curses are wily little creatures and none can command time."

"So what are you going to do with me?" she asked faintly.

He rose to his feet, his face devoid of expression, and he was once again warrior-lord, icy and remote. "I will tell you when I have decided, lass."

She dropped her head in her hands and didn't need to look up to know he was leaving the room and locking her in again. It offended her that he was so much in control of her, and she felt an overwhelming need to have the last word, childish though the impulse was. She decided that making small demands early on might strengthen her position.

"Well, are you going to starve me?" she yelled at the closed door. She'd also learned years ago that mustering defiance could prevent tears from spilling. Sometimes anger was the only defense one had.

She wasn't certain if she heard a rumble of laughter or if she imagined it.

CHAPTER 6

LISA WOKE WITH SORE, KNOTTED MUSCLES AND A KINK in her neck from sleeping without a pillow—sensations so tangible they shouted, *Welcome to reality*. She was surprised she'd managed to fall asleep at all, but exhaustion had finally overcome her paranoia. She'd slept in her clothes and her jeans were stiff and uncomfortable. She was cold, her T-shirt was twisted around her neck, her bra had come unsnapped, and her lower back ached from the lumpy mattresses.

She sighed and rolled over onto her back, stretching gingerly. She had slept, dreamed anxious, eerie dreams, and awakened to the same stone chamber. That sealed it: This was no dream. Had she any residual doubts, they disintegrated in the pale light of dawn that lined the edges of the gently blowing tapestries. No nightmare could have conjured the nauseating food she'd choked down late last night, nor in any dream would she have subconsciously surrounded herself with such primitive amenities. Fertile though her imagination was, it was not sadistic.

Although, she reflected, Circenn Brodie was indisputably the stuff of dreams.

He'd kissed her. He'd lowered his mouth to hers and the touch of his tongue had sent heat lancing through her body, despite her fear. She'd trembled, actually *shaken* from head to toe, when his lips had bruised hers. She'd read about things like that happening but never thought to experience it. Before she'd fallen asleep last night, she had filed every detail of the kiss away in her memory, a priceless artifact in the barren museum of her life.

Why had he kissed her? He was so intent and controlled, she had imagined that if he ever touched a woman it would have been with a disciplined caress, not such a kiss as he'd given her—one that had been wild, hot, and uninhibited. Bordering on savage, yet infinitely seductive. Made a woman want to toss her head back and whimper with pleasure while he ravished her. He was skilled, and she knew she was out of her league with Circenn Brodie.

It must have been a strategy, she decided; the man dripped strategies. Perhaps he'd thought to seduce her into compliance. Given his appearance coupled with the dark sexuality he exuded, he'd probably controlled women all his life in such a fashion.

"Somebody—anybody—please help me," she whispered softly. "I'm in *way* over my head."

Pushing the memory of his kiss far from her mind, she stretched her arms over her head, testing for bruises from their skirmish last night. When she heard a scrabbling at the door and the sound of the bolt being slid, she squeezed her eyes shut, pretending she was asleep. She was not ready to face him this morning.

"Well, come on with ye, lassie! Ye willna escape by being a lie-about in bed all day," said a mischievous voice.

Lisa's eyes flew open. A boy stood beside her, peering down. "Och, aren't ye the bonniest lassie!" he exclaimed. The lad had auburn hair, a gamin grin, and unusually dark eyes and skin. His chin was pointy, his cheekbones high. Quite a fey-looking child, she thought.

"Come! Follow me!" he cried. When he darted from the room, Lisa tossed back the covers and dashed out the door behind him without a second thought.

Heavens, the boy was quick! She had to stretch her long legs to keep pace as he skimmed over the stones toward a door at the end of the dim corridor. "Here, quickly!" he cried, as he ducked through the doorway.

Had it been anyone but a child she would never have blindly followed, but waking up and being granted a chance to escape by an innocent child overrode her common sense, and she found herself trailing him into a small turret. As she ducked in, he closed the door swiftly. They stood in a circular stone room, with stairs winding both up and down. When he grabbed her hand and started to pull her down the stairs, Lisa's eyes narrowed suspiciously. Who was this child and why was he intent on helping her flee? She resisted his grip so suddenly that he stumbled backward.

"Wait a minute." She held him by the shoulders. "Who are you?"

The boy shrugged innocently, dislodging her grip. "Me? Just a wee lad who has the run of the keep. Dinna fash yerself, lassie, no one notices me. I've come to help ye escape."

"Why?"

The boy shrugged again, a hasty up-and-down of thin shoulders. "Does it matter

to ye? Dinna ye wish to flee?"

"But where will I go?" Lisa drew several deep breaths, trying to wake up. She needed to think this through. What would escaping the keep accomplish?

"Away from here," he said, peeved by her obtuseness.

"And where to?" Lisa repeated, as her sleepy mind finally started functioning with a semblance of intelligence. "Become one of the Bruce's camp followers? Go talk to Longshank's son?" she said dryly.

"Are ye a spy?" he exclaimed indignantly.

"No! But where am I going to go? Escaping the keep is only the beginning of my problems."

"Dinna ye have a home, lassie?" he asked, perplexed.

"Not in this century," Lisa said, as she sank to the floor with a sigh. Adrenaline had flooded her body at the prospect of escape. Vanquished by logic, it now fled her veins as swiftly as it had arrived, and its sudden absence made her feel limp. Judging by the coldness of the wall behind her back and the chilly draft circling through the tower, it was cold outside. If she left, how would she eat? Where would she go? How could she escape when there was no place for her to escape to? She eyed the boy, who appeared crestfallen.

"I dinna ken what ye mean, but I thought only to help ye. I ken what these men do to the lassies. 'Tisna pleasant."

"Thanks for the reassurance," Lisa said dryly. She studied the lad for a moment. His gaze was bright and direct, his eyes were old for such a young face.

He sank to the floor beside her. "So, what can I do for ye, lassie," he asked dejectedly, "if ye haven't a home and I canna be freeing ye?"

There was one thing he could help her with, she realized, for she certainly wouldn't ask the illustrious Circenn Brodie this question. "I need to... um... I drank too much water," she informed him carefully.

A quicksilver grin flashed across his face. "Wait here with ye." He dashed off up the stairs. When he came back he was carrying a stoneware basin that looked

identical to the one she had struck Circenn in the head with last night.

She regarded it uncertainly. "And then what?"

"Why, then ye dump it out a window," he said, as if she were daft.

Lisa winced. "There is no window in this tower."

"I'll dump it for ye," he said simply, and she realized that this was the way of things. He'd probably dumped hundreds of them in his short life. "Och, but I'll be giving ye some privacy for the now," he added, and dashed off again up the stairs.

True to his word, he returned in a few moments and dashed off a third time with the basin.

Lisa sat on the stairs, waiting for the lad to return. Her options were limited: She could foolishly escape the castle and likely die out there, or go back to her room and get as close to her enemy as possible in hopes of finding that flask—which she *had* to believe was a two-way ticket. It was either that or accept that she was condemned to the fourteenth century forever, and with her mother dying back home, she would sooner die herself than accept that fate.

"Tell me about Circenn Brodie," she said when the boy returned. He hunkered down on the step beside her.

"What do ye wish to ken?"

Does he kiss all the lassies? "Is he a fair man?"

"None fairer," the lad assured her.

"As in honorable, not attractive," Lisa clarified.

He grinned. "I ken what ye meant. The laird is a fair man, he doesna make hasty judgments."

"Then why were you trying to help me escape?"

Another shrug. "I heard his men speaking last night of killin' ye. I figured if ye was still breathing this morning I'd be helping ye go free." His thin face stilled

and his eyes grew distant. "Me mam was killed when I was five. I doona like to see a lassie suffer. Ye could be someone's mam." Guileless brown eyes sought hers.

Lisa's heart went out to the motherless boy. She understood all too well the pain of losing a mother. She hoped his "mam" had not suffered long, but had met with a swift and merciful death. She gently brushed his tangled hair back from his forehead. He leaned in to her caress as if he'd been starved for such a touch. "What's your name, boy?"

"Ye may call me Eirren, but in truth I'd answer to anything from ye," he said with a flirtatious grin.

She shook her head in mock reproach. "How old are you?"

He cocked an eyebrow and grinned. "Old enough to know yer a bonny lassie. I may not be a man yet, but one day I will, so I better be getting all the practice I can."

"Incorrigible," she murmured.

"Nay, just thirteen," he said easily. "The way I see it, a boy can get away with a lot a man can't, so I'd best do it all now. What else did ye wish to ken, lassie?"

"Is he married?" *What kind of wife could handle a man like him?* She could have kicked herself the moment she said it, but then she decided Eirren surely wouldn't understand her interest.

"Ye wish to tup him?" he asked curiously.

Tup him? Lisa puzzled over that for a moment. "Oh!" she said, as she realized what he meant. "Stop that!" she exclaimed. "You can't think like that! You're *too* young. Tup, indeed."

He grinned. "I grew up hearing it from the men, how could I not? I haven't had me a mam in a long time."

"Well, you need one," Lisa said softly. "No one should be without a mother."

"Did he kiss ye?"

"No!" she lied hastily. She ducked her head, bringing a fall of hair forward to hide her blush from the too-perceptive boy.

"Fool he is, then," Eirren said with his gamin grin. "Well, lassie, ye better be deciding what ye wish to do. If yer not going, yer staying, and if yer staying ye best go back to yer room afore he discovers ye missing. He doesna like rules bein' broken, and ye escaping yer room would fair give him a fit." He rose to his feet and dusted off his scabbed knees.

"You need a bath," she informed him, deciding that if she had anything to say about it while she was there, he'd have a mother of sorts.

"Aye, and there are some things I dinna miss about me mam being gone *at all*," Eirren said cheerfully. "Come on with ye. I see ye've decided to stay in the cave with the bear, which isna all bad; his growl is much worse than his bite, once ye get him to relax."

Lisa smiled as she followed him from the stairwell. Young Eirren saw far too much for her comfort, but he might prove a useful ally for that very reason. Scampering about like a busy mouse, the inquisitive lad probably knew every nook and cranny of the castle. She would do well to cultivate his company, surreptitiously of course. As if he'd read her thoughts, Eirren spoke, as he gently pushed her back in her room. "Doona be telling the laird about me, lassie. He willna like me speaking with ye. It must be a secret between only two. I ken ye wouldna wish to get me in trouble, would ye now?" He held her gaze.

"Our secret," Lisa agreed.

CHAPTER 7

CIRCENN SMACKED DUNCAN'S THIGH WITH THE FLAT OF his blade. "Pay attention, Douglas," he growled. "Distraction will kill a man in battle."

Duncan shook his head and frowned as he counted off five paces and faced Circenn. "Sony, but I thought I saw a child dart into the bothy behind the keep."

"Most likely that young serving lass Floria, who scarce reaches my ribs," Circenn said. "You know no children are permitted at Dunnottar."

"If so, it was a bloody small lass." Duncan leveled his sword with a smooth flick of his muscled forearm. "And although you and Galan think I like 'em all, I doona like 'em *that* young."

Their swords met in a clash of steel that sent sparks cartwheeling into the mist as dawn broke over Dunnottar. Dimly visible beyond damp low-hanging clouds, the sun bobbed on the shimmering horizon of the ocean, and the mist that had blown in with the night tide began to steam off slowly.

"Come, Douglas, fight me," Circenn goaded. Duncan had trained with Circenn since youth and was one of the few men who could hold his own in battle against him, for a short time, at least; then Circenn's superior strength and endurance finished him.

Parry and thrust, feint and spin. The two performed an ancient warrior's dance around the courtyard until suddenly Duncan penetrated Circenn's protective stance, the tip of his blade resting at the laird's throat.

The circle of knights flinched collectively as Circenn froze, his gaze fixed not on Duncan's blade but high on the east face of the keep.

"She is walking calamity. The lass is absolutely without wits, I vow it," Circenn said. He released a string of curses that caused even Duncan to raise a brow.

All eyes turned to the east where a slender woman clung to the stone wall, fifty feet above the ground. Knotted linens flapped in the breeze, dangling a dozen feet beneath her. It was obvious what she was doing, dropping down the dozen feet to the window beneath hers, preparing to enter it.

"Why does she not simply use the door, milord?" one of the Templars asked.

"I locked it," Circenn muttered.

Duncan lowered his sword and cursed. "I should have known I didn't beat you fairly."

"Who is she?" another knight asked. "And what manner of dress is she wearing? It is as if she has naught a stitch on. You can see the separate curves of her... er..."

"Yes, who is she, milord?" a half-dozen knights echoed.

Circenn's eyes never strayed from the slim figure descending the wall with no small degree of finesse. Clad in those strange trousers, one could indeed see every inch of her shapely derriere as her long legs stretched to find a toehold. He'd been holding his breath since the moment the flicker of linen had caught his eye. Now he expelled it in a gusty sigh. "I was not supposed to reveal her," he lied swiftly, meeting Duncan's gaze with a silent warning. He was momentarily appalled at how easily the lie had sprung to his lips. *See, he berated himself, break one rule and they all go to hell.* "She is cousin to the Bruce and I have been entrusted with her keeping. You will protect her as you would fight for Robert himself. Apparently she cares little for being secured. I suppose we may have to give her run of the keep." With those words, he thrust his sword into his scabbard and stalked off into the ruin.

At the door, Circenn glanced over his shoulder at Duncan with another warning look that threatened grave repercussions if Duncan didn't support his story and protect the lass. The look on Duncan's face made him feel two inches tall. His friend and trusted adviser was gazing at him with astonishment, as if a stranger had taken over the laird of Brodie's body. Duncan shook his head and his expression clearly said, *What the hell are you doing? Have you lost your mind?*

As Circenn entered the tower and took the stairs two at a time, he decided he very possibly had.

* * *

Lisa kicked her feet and gently swung herself into the window, exhaling a sigh of relief. With her daddy's encouragement she'd taken extracurricular tumbling and

rappelling through junior high and high school. Although this climb hadn't looked too difficult, it certainly had been unnerving dangling above the courtyard, praying her knots would hold. She'd hoped the mist would take longer to burn off, and when the sun had begun to steam away the thick clouds she'd hurried, aware that the fighters below would have a clear view at any moment —*if* they looked up.

But Lisa was counting on the fact that people rarely looked up; the vast majority kept their gaze fixed firmly on the ground or on some nonexistent point in the sea of people surging down the city sidewalks. Only Lisa and some of the homeless people scanned the sky, watching the clouds break and scuttle.

Dreamer, her father had teased. *Only dreamers watch the sky. You're a romantic, Lisa. Are you waiting for a winged horse to break through the clouds carrying your prince on his back?*

After Eirren had left, she'd waited in her room for Circenn Brodie to come, and when he didn't appear she'd grown increasingly restless. She needed to find the flask, and with her door bolted from the outside, she didn't have many options. She'd looked out the window and discovered another one a dozen feet below it. She'd quickly decided to have a look around while it was possible.

And if he caught her? She didn't care. The lord of the castle needed to know that she was not the kind of woman who would sit about waiting for his decisions, abiding his control. She'd considered her situation thoroughly, and yes, it appeared that she was truly in the fourteenth century. And yes, she had a mother who was dying in the twenty-first. She couldn't escape the castle, but she needed to assert herself as an innocent woman who was due a modicum of respect, and whom Circenn should help return to her time. Doing nothing was simply not an option. The only way she'd ever been able to cope with the difficulties in her life had been to meet them head-on, eyes open, mind working to achieve resolution.

She shoved aside the tapestry and leaped down from the windowsill. Her boots hit the floor with a soft thud just as he burst through the door.

"What an idiotic, insensible, stupid thing to do!"

"It was *not* stupid," she snapped, harboring a special hatred for that word. "It was a perfectly calculated and well-thought-out risk. Don't even start. If you hadn't locked me in, I wouldn't have been forced to do it."

He crossed the room swiftly and grabbed her. "Do you realize you could have fallen?" he roared.

She drew herself up to her full height, her back ramrod straight. "Of course I do. That's why I knotted the linens together. For heaven's sake, it was only a dozen feet."

"And the wind could have snatched you off at any moment. While it may only be a dozen feet from window to window, it is a fifty-foot fall to the ground. Even my men wouldn't do something so stupid."

"It wasn't stupid," she repeated evenly. "It was an intelligent exercise of my skills. Where I come from I've done it before, and besides, I had no way of knowing whether you planned to feed me today or talk to me or listen to the fact that I desperately need to get back home. And while we're on the subject of idiocy—is lunging at each other with sharp swords any less stupid? I saw what you were doing down there."

"We train," he said, lowering his voice with obvious effort. "We prepare for war." If the man clenched his teeth any harder, his jaw would lock, she decided.

"And war is a particularly intelligent venture, is it not? I'm merely battling for my rights and trying to return home. I have a life, you know. I have responsibilities at home."

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and regarded her for a moment. "What exactly are those responsibilities?" he asked finally, very softly.

Very softly from this man made her nervous, as did his hands on her waist, as did his moving so near that his breath fanned her face as she stared up at him. She felt suddenly cowed. *Damn* the man for having such an impact. She was not going to cry her heart out to this wall of warrior.

She took a deep breath and willed herself to calm down. "I know this is not the best situation for you but it's not for me either. How would you feel if you were suddenly yanked from your time, thrown somewhere else, and held captive? Wouldn't you do everything in your power to get your life back? To return to your homeland and win your battle for freedom?"

His jaw relaxed as he pondered her words. "You behave like a warrior," he said

grudgingly. "Aye, I would do everything in my power to return."

"Then you can't blame me for trying. Or for being here, or for complicating your life. I'm the one whose life has been messed up. At least you still understand where you are. You still have your friends and family. You still have security. All I know is that I must get back home."

He was quiet for what seemed an interminable time, looking into her eyes. She could feel tension emanating from his body as he studied her, and she realized that this fourteenth-century warrior was struggling as hard as she was to figure out what to do next.

"You frightened me, lass. I thought you would fall. Doona climb my walls again, eh? I will find a way to give you some small freedom within the keep. I trust you were not trying to escape the keep itself; you are obviously intelligent enough to see you have no place to go. But doona climb my walls," he repeated. Then he rubbed his jaw, looking suddenly weary. "I am unable to send you back home, lass, I told you the truth about that last night. There's something else you should know as well. The conversation you overheard before you attacked me last night was correct: I did swear an oath to kill whoever arrived with my flask."

Lisa swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. He *had* come to kill her last night. Would he have slipped in stealthily and slit her throat if she hadn't been awake and ambushed him first?

He looked directly into her eyes. "But I have made the decision to temporarily refrain from fulfilling my oath. That is not an easy thing for a warrior to do. We hold our vows sacred."

"Oh, how gracious of you," she said dryly. "So you don't plan to kill me today, but you might just decide to tomorrow. Am I supposed to find that reassuring?"

"There are valid reasons why I swore my oath. And aye, you should be grateful that I am letting you live for the now."

She would take what she could get. It wasn't as if she had much to bargain with. "What possible threat could I be to you? Why would you swear an oath to kill a person you didn't even know?" But even as she asked, she knew the answer to her question—whatever was in the flask was immensely valuable. Perhaps it was

a tool to travel through time; that would certainly explain why people were casting curses upon it and willing to kill for it. Hadn't he snatched it from her the moment she'd arrived?

"My reasons doona concern you."

"I think they do concern me, when your reasons determine whether *I* live or die." She knew that oaths were sacred to knights of yore. He had nothing to lose by killing her. She was a woman lost in time; no one would miss her. Keeping her alive created a liability for him, and what would prevent him from suddenly changing his mind and honoring his vow? She would not be able to stand living day to day, always wondering if this would be the day he killed her. She needed to gain insight into how this warrior thought so that she could plan a defense. "Why did you decide to break your oath?"

"Temporarily," he corrected stiffly. "I did not break the oath, I merely have not filled it. Yet."

"Temporarily," she conceded. A ruthless murderer would not have bothered to have this conversation with her, which meant he had reservations about killing her. Once she knew what they were, she would exploit them to her advantage. "So, why? Is it because I'm a woman?" If that was the case, she resolved, she would be as feminine as possible from this moment on. She would drip vulnerability, bat her eyelashes, and ooze helplessness while doing everything in her power to steal the flask back and regain the upper hand.

"That is what I thought at first, but nay, it is because I doona know if you are guilty of anything. I have no problem killing a traitor, but I have not yet taken an innocent life and I doona wish to start now. But, Lisa, should I discover you are guilty of *anything*, no matter how small the transgression..." He trailed off, but his point was perfectly clear.

Lisa closed her eyes. So, he intended to watch her, study her, before he decided whether he would kill her. But she didn't have time to be studied and watched. Her mother needed her now. Time was of the essence, and if she didn't find a way back soon, she might lose Catherine without getting to say good-bye, and there was much she needed to say to her mother still. She'd been so obsessed with earning enough money to make ends meet, and with maintaining a cheerful smile on her face to keep her mom's spirits up, that somehow they had quit

talking. Both mother and daughter had retreated into cautious pleasantries because the reality was too painful. But Lisa had always thought there would be time, a few special hours, maybe a week, in which she stopped going to work, incurred more debt, and did what she most wanted—stayed at home with Catherine, holding her hand and talking until the very end.

She shook her head, bewildered and more than a little angry at what life had dealt her. How *dare* her life keep getting worse? She stiffened her spine and her eyes flew open. "I *must* get back home," she insisted.

"It is impossible, lass. Returning you is not in my power."

"Do you know anyone who can?" she pushed. "You must concede, it would be the best solution. All our problems would be solved if you simply sent me back."

"Nay. I know no one who has such power."

Did he hesitate briefly? Or did her desperate need to cling to hope conjure the illusion? "What about the flask?" she said quickly. "What if I touched—"

"Forget the flask," he shouted, straightening to his full height and glaring down at her. "It belongs to me, and I have already told you that it cannot return you to your time. The flask is *my* property. You would do well to forsake all thought of it and never mention it to me again."

"I refuse to believe there is no way for me to return."

"But that is the first fact you must accept. Until you acknowledge that you cannot return home, you will have no hope of surviving here. One of the first lessons a warrior is taught is that denial of one's circumstances only results in failure to recognize real danger. And I assure you, Lisa Stone, there is infinite danger in your present situation."

"You don't scare me," she said defiantly.

He stepped so close that his body brushed against hers, but she refused to back up an inch. For all she cared, he could stand on top of her, but she would not yield ground; she had a feeling that lost ground was not something a person ever got back from Circenn Brodie. She returned his glare.

"You should be afraid of me, lass. You are a fool if you are not afraid of me."

"Then I'm a fool. If I went through time once, it can happen again."

"Would that it could, for it would certainly make my life easier. Then I would not be caught in this dilemma. But I doona know how to make it happen. Believe that much, at least."

Lisa found herself studying his face the way he'd searched her eyes moments ago, seeking some way to gauge if he was telling her the truth. But she was intelligent enough to recognize that she was in the defensive position—he being the massive and invincible offense. She would be wise not to push him too far.

"Temporary truce?" she offered at last, not meaning a word of it, resolved to find the flask at the earliest opportunity and fight him any way she could.

"You will abstain from climbing my walls?"

"You promise you won't try to kill me without first telling me, so I can have a bit of time to accept it? A few days would do," she countered, postponing the possibility of death any way she could.

"Will you pretend to be cousin to the Bruce, as I told my men?" he said gravely.

"Will you promise that if there is a way for me to get back home, you'll let me go? *Alive*" she added, stressing the word.

"Say 'aye' first, lass," he demanded.

Lisa held her breath for a moment, looking at him. She had little choice but to pledge this bizarre truce to him. If she tried to back out now, she suspected they'd be fighting again in a matter of moments. "Aye," she mimicked his accent.

He studied her, as if measuring the depth of her honesty and commitment to her words. "Then aye, lass. If a way can be found to return you, I will help you do it." The corner of his mouth twitched in a strangely bitter smile. "It will get you the hell out of my life and my compromised integrity," he added softly, more to himself than to her.

"Truce," she accepted. *Integrity*, she jotted in her mental file of significant facts about Circenn Brodie. It was important to him. She experienced a flash of hope:

The precise knightly characteristics that might drive him to fulfill his oath—which included integrity, honor, protection of those weaker than he, and respect and chivalry toward women—could also be prevailed upon to *prevent* him from doing it. Killing a helpless woman would surely not be easy for him. She knew that sealing an agreement was no small matter to a knight, so she extended her hand for the seal of a handshake, not realizing how thoroughly modern-day the gesture was.

He eyed it for a moment, took it, then pressed it to his lips and kissed it.

Lisa snatched back her hand with a scowl. Heat tingled where his lips had brushed her skin.

"You offered it," he snapped.

"That wasn't what I—oh, forget it," Lisa floundered, then explained, "We don't kiss hands in my time—"

"But we are not in your time. You are in my time now, lass. I cannot stress enough how important it is for you to remember that, at all times." His voice was low, his words clipped as if he were irritated by her response. "And so there are no further misunderstandings between us, I will explain: Should you offer me a part of your body, lass, I will kiss it. That is what men in my century do." His smile was mocking, couching a none-too-subtle challenge.

Lisa folded her hands behind her back. "I understand," she said, casting her gaze to the floor in a deceptively submissive manner.

He waited for a moment as if not quite trusting her acquiescence, but when she didn't raise her eyes again, he turned toward the door. "Good. Now we need to find you decent clothing and teach you how to be a proper fourteenth-century lass. The better you blend in, the less risk you will face, and the less risky your presence will be for me."

"I will not empty chamber pots," she said firmly.

He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

* * *

Circenn returned Lisa to his chambers, had hot water sent up for her to wash

with, then went off in search of clothing for her. Chamber pots, indeed. Did she think they were so barbaric that they did not have garderobes? Chamber pots were used only for nocturnal emergencies, primarily by children and the infirm, and in his opinion there was no reason why anyone could not manage to make it down the hallway, unless they were possessed of extreme laziness and lack of discipline.

He snorted, focusing his mind on the task at hand. He couldn't give her run of the keep until he'd managed to hide some of those curves and long legs beneath the ugliest gown he could find. His men needed no distractions. He gathered the maids and instructed them to procure a gown, all the while brooding over what to do with her.

When he'd questioned Lisa last night, he'd nearly begun to believe she was innocent. She had a disarming air about her, an altitude of sincerity. He'd relaxed a bit, even glimpsed a wry humor in their conversation. Then she'd admitted that she was from the future, and he'd realized that his curse had inadvertently carried her through time.

Although it had stunned him, it made sense: Her strange English, her odd clothing, her mention of countries of which he'd never heard, all were explained by her being from the future. He could certainly understand her people fleeing England, he thought wryly—who wouldn't want to? It didn't surprise him that in the future, England was still trying to control everyone.

He laughed softly, thinking that she didn't know how lucky she was that she'd been brought to him and not some other medieval lord. Circenn accepted time travel, but he was an extreme exception. Any other laird would have burned her for a witch. But then again, he thought dryly, no other laird would have had the power to curse the damned flask to begin with.

It was due to Adam Black that he was familiar with the art of sifting time. Adam did it frequently, had often spoken of other centuries, and he'd brought Circenn odd "gifts" in some of his attempts to buy the laird's loyalty and obedience. They were gifts Circenn had refused, but when Adam wouldn't take them back, he had locked them securely in a private room off his chambers, not trusting their powers. He knew that Adam was trying to tempt him, hoping to make him become like Adam—a thing Circenn would destroy himself before permitting that to happen.

The lass had been wearing one of those strange "gifts" fastened about her wrist, before Circenn had slipped it from her arm in their struggle last night. He'd inspected it later; it was what Adam had once called a "watch." Adam had found it endlessly amusing, saying it was how mortals counted their "pathetic span of life." Her watch seemed to confirm her story.

If he believed her version of events, his chest had washed down the river, surfacing in some remote area. It had not been found, and, over time, nature had buried it. Hundreds of years had passed before it had been dug up, and when she'd touched it, it had brought her back to him.

Was it possible that in the future, men still sought the hallows and the secret of the flask as avariciously as they did in his century? Was it possible she had come there to uncover the treasures of the *Tuatha de Danaan* and the Templars? He might have suspected Adam's involvement in this, but for two reasons: There was no point in Adam's bringing to him a woman he was forsworn to kill, and Adam didn't manipulate events unless there was a very specific thing he wanted to gain from his devious machinations. Circenn couldn't see one possible thing Adam might be after in this tangle. The flask and the hallows already belonged to Adam's race; Circenn was merely the guardian. Adam had already shaped Circenn as he wanted—there was nothing more he could possibly hope to "change" about the laird of Brodie. No, Circenn mused, there was nothing of Adam in this. But the lass might be in league with the "employers" she'd mentioned; she could well be from a treacherous future, after his secrets.

He would have to watch her, study her, keep her near. It would take time, and time was a luxury he could ill afford in the thick of an ongoing war. Besides, he brooded, any time spent in the lass's presence was a slow torture. Loath though he was to admit it, he was susceptible where she was concerned. Stunning, proud, sensual, and intelligent, the woman would be a formidable foe—or a valued ally. He hadn't met a woman like her in centuries.

Curse me home, she'd said. Circenn snorted, recalling her plea. The only person who could send her back home was the one person who would kill her instantly if he knew she was there: Adam. He certainly couldn't call on Adam and ask *him* to send the woman home, nor could he risk meeting with Adam to dig for clues as to whether he was somehow involved. The blackest elf was far too clever to be probed, even by Circenn.

He was acting against everything he had lived by, all his careful rules designed to keep him human; he was breaking an oath, defending a person who could be a spy, lying to his men. He was taking a huge risk by letting her live, and if he was wrong...

Sighing, he finished giving orders and headed off for the kitchen to prepare his men for the introduction of Lisa MacRobertson, cousin to Robert the Bruce.

Adam Black didn't bother to materialize. He remained invisible, a wisp of sultry air lightly scented with jasmine and sandalwood, dogging Circenn's footsteps, consumed by curiosity. That perfect paragon of a man—Circenn Brodie, who'd never broken a rule, never betrayed a weakness, not once wavered on rigid issues of morality—was breaking a sworn oath and willfully deceiving his men. *Fascinating*, Adam marveled. He'd long thought the laird of Brodie had no breaking point, and had nearly despaired of ever finding the proper catalyst.

He sensed that Circenn didn't believe Adam was involved in his present tangle, because he couldn't pinpoint anything Adam might want. Adam smiled faintly. Circenn hated being manipulated. It was best that the laird of Brodie remain blissfully unaware that Adam had carefully orchestrated every move in this game, and was playing for the highest stakes of all.

CHAPTER 8

LISA STEPPED INTO THE GOQN AND TURNED TO FACE the polished metal propped against the wall. She'd been surprised when a mirror had been brought to her chamber. Sifting through her history studies, she recalled that mirrors dated as far back as Egyptian times, perhaps earlier. She knew the Romans had constructed sophisticated sewage systems thousands of years ago, so why should a mere mirror surprise her? It was too bad she couldn't help them rediscover plumbing, she mused. She rubbed at the soot on the chipped metal until it revealed her shadowy reflection.

The soft dress clung to her hips, so full of static it crackled. She struggled for a moment, trying to pull it up over her shoulders, but the gown had been made for someone considerably smaller than she. Although she was slim, she was tall and had full breasts; half of her wouldn't fit in the dress. Sighing, she slipped the gown from her hips and stepped out of it. She was moving toward the bed to retrieve her jeans when the door opened.

"I brought you—" The words terminated abruptly.

She whirled around to find Circenn frozen in the doorway, his gaze fixed on her, a cloak tossed over his arm. It slipped to the floor, unheeded.

Then he stepped into the room and kicked the door shut behind him. "What manner of dress have you donned?" he thundered. His dark eyes glittered as they swept her body from head to toe. He sucked in a rough breath.

Lisa shivered. He *would* have to catch her standing there in the only frivolous thing she owned, a pair of lavender bikini panties and a matching lace push-up bra that Ruby had given her for her birthday. And skin. And a damp nervousness she attributed to fear.

He stalked to her side and slipped a finger beneath the delicate lace edging one cup of her bra. "What is this?"

"It... it... Oh!" She couldn't form a coherent sentence. His ringer lay against her pale skin, and she was mesmerized by the contrast in colors and textures. He had large hands, callused and strong from swordplay, with elegant fingers, one of

which now rested against the smooth swell of her breast. She closed her eyes. "Bra," she managed. Grasping at formality, she pretended she was giving a history lesson in reverse, teaching him what the future held: "It's a garment designed t-to protect a woman's, you know, and k-keeps them from, well, you know..."

"Nay, I doona think I know at all," he said softly, his lips a few breaths from meeting hers. "Why doona you enlighten me, lass?"

Her breath caught in her throat with a small gasp—a consummately feminine sound, and she cursed herself silently for it. *Just pant, why don't you?* she berated herself. They were scant, dangerous inches from full body contact, his finger tugging gently at the edging of her bra. She was acutely aware of her near nudity, of her nipples beneath the thin fabric in perilous proximity to his hands, and the fact that he wore nothing more than a drape of easily discarded cloth. She felt electricity race through her body everywhere his gaze skimmed. If he ripped off his plaid and covered her body with his, would she have the strength to protest? Would she even want to? How could her body betray her to a man who was her enemy? "The gown was too small," she managed.

"I see. And you astutely concluded this would cover more of you?"

"I was just about to put my j-jeans back on," she informed his chest.

"I think not. Not until you tell me what this"—he rugged lightly at the strap—"keeps your 'you knows' from doing."

Was he teasing her? She forced herself to meet his gaze and instantly wished she hadn't. His dark eyes were intensely sexual, his lips parted in a faint smile.

"Drooping when you get older." The words escaped her in a rush of air.

He tossed his head back and laughed. When he lowered his head she saw the unnerving intensity in his eyes, and she realized he was aroused. *By her.* The knowledge astounded her. She'd decided that his kiss last night and his innuendos today had simply been part of his strategy, but now, looking at him, she understood that he had a fierce physical reaction to her, possibly as painful as her attraction to him. It was simultaneously a heady feeling and a frightening one. She had a sudden premonition that if she gave him the slightest indication

of her interest, he would descend upon her with the gale force of a Saharan sirocco, every bit as hot and devastating. Hungry for it, aching with inexperience and curiosity, she wanted desperately to discover what a man like Circenn Brodie might do to a woman.

But she dared not explore that desire. She would be as a lamb to the slaughter. She had never been romanced, and the laird of Brodie could seduce a saint, she thought. Although she'd wanted him to be aware of her as a woman, thinking it might make him more protective of her, she had a dreadful feeling that she would lose herself entirely if he kissed her again. He was just too overwhelming. She had to defuse the sexual chemistry between them, and the best way to do that was to get her clothing back on.

She dropped to her knees, lunging for the gown pooled at her feet, but he moved in flawless accord and she ended up kneeling nose to nose with him, and *he* was holding her dress.

They stared at each other while she counted her heartbeats; she'd reached twenty before he favored her with a slow smile. Tension crackled in the air between them.

"You are a beauty, lass." He cupped her cheek with his hand and swept a light kiss across her lips before she could protest. "Long legs, beautiful hair"—he slipped his hand into it, letting silky strands sweep through his fingers—"and fire in your eyes. I have seen many bonny lasses but I doona believe I have ever encountered one quite like you. You make me think I might discover parts of myself I doona know exist. What am I to do with you?" He waited, his lips mere inches from hers.

"Let me get dressed," she breathed.

He searched her face intently. She held her breath then, terrified that if she opened her mouth she would cry, *Yes! Touch me, feel me, love me, damn it, because I don't know what it feels like any more to forget that I hurt and that my mother is dying!*

Often, during her mother's illness, Lisa had found herself longing for a boyfriend, a lover: someone she could take her bartered heart to and curl up with, even if only for an hour, for the illusion of security, warmth, and love.

Now, half terrified, worried about her mother dying alone, she had a perverse impulse to seek shelter in the arms of the very man sworn to kill her.

Don't try to use a Band-Aid on your heart, Lisa, Catherine would have reminded her, had she been there. Any sense of security or intimacy with him would be nothing but an illusion. She needed to keep her mind clear, not filled with romantic fancy about some medieval Highland laird who might decide to kill her tomorrow.

He dropped his hand from her hair, skimming her collarbone and curving his fingers over the lacy scallop of her bra. He studied the sheer fabric with fascination, his gaze caressing the uplifted curves of her breasts, the deeper shadow of her cleavage. "Look at me, lass," he whispered. Lisa raised her eyes to his and wondered what he saw in them. Hesitation? Curiosity? Desire she couldn't hide?

Whatever it was he saw in her eyes, it wasn't a Yes, and this man was a proud one.

He traced a finger down the hollow between her breasts and the smile he gave her held a sadness she couldn't fathom.

"I will send someone to fetch you another gown, lass," he said. Then he left the room.

Lisa sank to the floor, clutching the gown. *Dear heavens,* she thought, *what am I going to do?*

* * *

Circenn stomped from her room, his mood worsening by the moment. His body ached from head to toe with the effort of being *gentle* with the lass. His face felt stiff from smiling *gently*; his fingers clenched and unclenched from touching the swell of her breasts *gently*. His body rebelled at his gracious, honorable, *gentle* retreat from her room, and the man within him that had been born into the world five hundred years ago roared that the woman was his, by Dagda! Gentleness be damned! In the ninth century a man had not asked—a man had taken! In the ninth century a woman had been amenable, grateful to find such a fierce protector and able provider.

Circenn laughed softly, bitterly. He'd been far too long without a woman to endure such torment. When he'd walked into the room, carrying the cloak that would have drowned her in its oversized folds, his mind had been focused solely upon covering as much of her as possible—only to find her clad in nothing but two lacy, gauzy pieces of fabric. With little bows! By Dagda, a tiny satin ribbon had perched jauntily between her breasts, and another at the front of the silky fabric that slipped between her legs. *Like a gift*, he thought. *Untie my bows and see what I have to give you...*

He'd tried to look away. To spin on his heel and leave the room, refusing himself the pleasure of viewing her lovely body. He'd sternly reminded himself of rule number four—no physical intimacy. But it had done him no good. Rule number four seemed to have become quite friendly with rule number one—never break an oath—and was cozying up nicely to rule number two—do not lie. What a crowd they were becoming, his broken rules.

Seeing her clad in such a fashion had been worse than if he'd caught her in complete undress. Nude, his hungry eyes could have feasted upon every crevice and hollow of her body; but those pieces of fabric had been cunningly designed to torture a man with the promise of the private slopes and hollows, while granting none of them. Secrets lay beneath that fabric. Were her nipples round dusky coins or puckered coral buds? Was her hair golden and copper there, too? If he had dropped to the floor at her feet, closed his hands around her ankles, and kissed his way up her long, lovely legs, would she have moaned softly, or was she silent when she made love? Nay, he decided abruptly, Lisa Stone would sound like a lioness mating when he took her. *Good*. He liked that in a woman.

She'd made him feel like a hungry animal, caged by his own rules, and all the more dangerous for it. For a few moments, lust had risen so furiously that he'd feared he might drag her beneath his body, uncaring whether she wished it. Instead, he'd clenched his shaking hands behind his back, dropping the cloak to the floor and thinking of his mother, Morganna, who would have disowned him even for thinking about taking by force that which must be gifted. Never had he felt so nearly violent with desire. She had roused deep, primitive feelings in him: possessiveness, jealousy that another man might see her clad thus, a need to hear her say his name and gaze at him with approval and desire.

Circenn drew a deep breath, held it until his heart slowed, then released it. Now

that he knew what was beneath her clothing—no matter what gown he made her wear—how would he be able to look at her again without seeing in his mind the endless expanse of silken skin? The gentle swells of her breasts, the tight nipples peaking the sheer gauze, the slight mound between her thighs.

Thwarted desire translated well into rage. He stomped down the stairs to the kitchen, determined to find Alesone or Floria and have one of them see to it that the lass was properly attired. Then he would send one of the Douglas brothers to teach her about their time, something he should have done himself, but he simply couldn't trust himself near her at the moment. He would go train with his men and release some of his frustration in the pure, clean joy of swinging a heavy sword, grunting and cursing. And he would *not* entertain one more erotic thought for the remainder of the day.

Shaking his head, he burst into the kitchen. It took him only an instant to realize that none of his plans for the day was going to go right. In fact, the day seemed to have taken on a devilish persona, determined to mock him.

He drew to an abrupt halt, hastily averting his gaze from the sight of the rounded and flushed bare bottom gripped in Duncan Douglas's hands.

Alesone had one long leg wrapped around Duncan's waist, her arms twined around his neck and her skirts tossed up to her shoulders. The foot that remained on the floor was arched upon the tips of her toes, as Duncan's hands guided her against him in a steady, intense rhythm. The low, sensual sounds of passion filled the room, soft intakes of air, husky murmurs of pleasure, and damned if Duncan wasn't emitting a deeply satisfied sound with each thrust.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Circenn roared, glancing at the ceiling, the walls, the floor—anywhere but at Alesone's shapely derriere. "Duncan! Alesone! Get out of the kitchen! Take it to the rooms upstairs! You know I have rules—

"Ah, yes, the legendary Brodie rules," Duncan said dryly. He stopped rocking the maid against him with more leisure than Circenn appreciated. "Which include among them: When knights are in residence, no tugging in the kitchen."

Alesone made a soft sound of protest at being interrupted.

"I *eat* in here!" Circenn thundered, feeling entirely too put upon.

"So does Duncan," Alesone purred suggestively. She slid her leg down from Duncan's waist slowly, giving Circenn a good, long look. With a coy smile, she dropped a lid onto the honey pot perched on the table near Duncan.

Circenn did *not* want to know what they'd been doing with the honey, and his expression must have clearly said as much, for Duncan burst into laughter.

"Excuse us, Cin." He grinned as he dropped Alesone's skirts with one hand, swung her up into his arms, and swept her from the kitchen.

Images of one-person-in-particular's bare, rounded bottom assaulted him.

Circenn kicked out a chair, dropped his head on the table, and reconsidered killing the lass just to put himself out of his misery.

CHAPTER 9

RUBY TOOK THE STAIRS TO THE STONES' APARTMENT two at a time, but slowed her stride when she reached the third floor and proceeded down the dimly lit corridor. A colorful welcome mat—one of Lisa's determinedly optimistic touches—brightened the appearance of the dismal door with its chips of peeling brown paint curling up from the underlying gray metal. APT. 3-G dangled at a lopsided slant from a single screw. Ruby raised her hand to knock but found herself straightening the sign instead, then dropped her fist to her side. She was dreading this visit. Twining a strand of hair around a nervous finger, she reminded herself that Lisa always faced things head-on; the least she could do was emulate her. When she raised her hand again, she knocked firmly. Elizabeth, the day nurse, opened it and ushered her in.

"Lisa? Is that you, darling?" Catherine called, a note of hope in her voice.

"No, Mrs. Stone. It's just me, Ruby," she replied as she crossed the small living room and turned down the narrow hallway to the bedroom. Entering the cozy room, she sank into a chair next to Catherine's bed and wondered where to begin. She plucked idly at the half-finished patchwork quilt resting on the arm of the chair. How was she going to break the latest news to Lisa's mom? Catherine was critically ill, her daughter had disappeared, and now Ruby had even worse news for her.

"What did the man at the museum say?" Catherine asked anxiously.

Ruby smoothed her hair and shifted in her seat. "Would you like some tea, honey?" she evaded.

Catherine's green eyes, uptilted and once as bright as her daughter's, met Ruby's with a cool reminder that she wasn't dead yet and wasn't stupid either. "What did you find out, Ruby? Don't try to distract me with tea. Has anyone seen my daughter?"

Ruby gently rubbed her eyes with her fingertips, careful not to smear her mascara. She'd been up most of the night and wondered for the tenth time how Lisa had managed to survive working two jobs for so long. She had been closing at the club when she received an urgent message from Mrs. Stone saying that

Lisa had been missing since the night before last. She had immediately phoned the police, then gone to the museum to see if Lisa had arrived at work last night—which she hadn't—then gone directly to the police station after speaking with that horse's ass Steinmann.

The officer had dutifully filed a missing person's report, which had been amended in a matter of hours by a warrant for Lisa Stone's arrest.

"No one has seen her since night before last," Ruby informed Catherine. "The museum's security cameras have her on tape. The last recorded image of her is outside Steinmann's office."

"So at least we know that she made it to work the night you saw her at the bus stop," Catherine said. "Do the cameras show her leaving that night?"

"No. That's what's so strange. Her slicker is still hanging by the door, and none of the cameras register her leaving. There are no cameras in Steinman's office, but he was quick to point out that there's a window she might have used." And quicker to make heinous accusations that Ruby knew weren't true. But how was she to prove it, and where on earth was Lisa? She didn't mention to Catherine that she'd gone to the police a second time, then had called every hospital within a sixty-mile radius, praying there were no Jane Does; blessedly, there hadn't been.

"Isn't Steinmann's office on the third floor?" Catherine asked, perplexed.

"Yes. But he promptly pointed out that Lisa took rappelling when she was younger. I guess she listed that on her application as one of her hobbies. I know she was pretty proud of that skill." Ruby shifted in her chair and took a deep breath. "Mrs. Stone, there's an artifact missing from the museum, and..."

"They've accused my daughter of stealing," Catherine said tightly. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Her... er... disappearance does make things look bad. According to Steinmann and his trusty tapes, he and a colleague entered his office several hours after Lisa had. The door wasn't locked and initially he thought she'd simply failed to lock up. Now he thinks she was hiding in the office, took the artifact after they left, and slipped out the window."

"What is this artifact?"

"They won't say. It seems they aren't completely certain what it was."

"My daughter is not a thief," Catherine said stiffly. "I will go speak with them."

"Catherine, let me handle this for you. You can't get up—"

"I have a wheelchair!" She gripped the sides of her hospital bed with thin hands and tried to push herself up.

"Catherine, honey," Ruby said, her heart breaking. "We'll find her. I promise. And we'll clear her name." She placed her hand over Catherine's, gently loosening her grip on the rails. "We both know Lisa would never do something like this. We'll find a way to prove it."

"My daughter would never steal and she certainly wouldn't leave me!" Catherine snapped. "She *should* leave me, but she wouldn't." The sudden burst of anger drained her, and she lay still for a moment. She drew a shuddering breath, then said faintly, "Steinnman pressed charges, didn't he? There's a... warrant... out for her, isn't there?"

Ruby flinched. "Yes."

Catherine inclined her head stiffly, then sank back against the pillows and closed her eyes. She was silent for so long that Ruby wondered if she'd fallen asleep. When she spoke again there was steel in her voice: "My daughter did not steal anything, and she's in great trouble. Lisa is too responsible not to come home unless something awful happened to her." Catherine opened her eyes. "Ruby, I hate to ask anything more of you, but for Lisa..."

Ruby didn't hesitate. "There's no need for apologies, honey, you know I love Lisa like a sister. Until she comes home—and she will be found and cleared—I'll be spending most of my time here. She may call or try to get a message to you, and someone who can move at the drop of a hat needs to be here in case she does."

"But you have your own life..." Catherine said gently.

Ruby's eyes filled with tears. Catherine's health had deteriorated rapidly since

she'd last seen her, the night they had gone out to celebrate Lisa's birthday. She clasped Catherine's hand in hers and said firmly, "We're going to find her, Catherine, and I'm hanging around until we do. I won't hear any arguments about it. We'll *find* her."

If she's still alive, Ruby thought, with a silent prayer.

CHAPTER 10

DUNCAN WHISTLED A LIVELY TUNE AS HE MADE HIS WAY to Circenn's chambers. Things had become quite interesting since the lass from the future had arrived. Circenn had willfully broken an oath and lied, and that, in Duncan's mind, was nearly cause for celebration. Even Galan had conceded over breakfast this morning that it was something of a breakthrough. Although Galan had pushed Circenn to fulfill his vow last night, this morning he'd admitted to Duncan that he hadn't seen Circenn Brodie quite so off balance in years. Nor had he seen such a look of fascination on his face as he'd glimpsed when he'd burst into Circenn's chambers last night. Galan had agreed with Duncan that the lass might be the best thing that could have happened to Circenn, shaking up his rigid rules, forcing him to question himself.

Eighteen generations of Douglasses had served the immortal laird of Brodie, and in the past few generations there had been much talk and deep concern about his increasing withdrawal. The Douglasses were worried about him. In the not-so-distant past, the laird of Brodie had presided over the courts of his eleven manors. But he hadn't done so in over a century, leaving it to the various knights he'd appointed in his place to settle his people's disputes. It used to be that the laird of Brodie had actively ridden out to his villages, talked with and been well acquainted with his people. Now Duncan wasn't sure Circenn could identify one of his own villagers if he stood before him.

For the past hundred years, Circenn had spent most of his time traveling from country to country, fighting other people's wars, and never being touched by any of it. He had only returned to Scotland to join the fight for his motherland when Robert the Bruce had been crowned king by Isabel, Countess of Buchan, at Scone.

Duncan's Uncle Tomas argued that the laird of Brodie needed to wed, that it would draw him back into the joys of life. But Circenn refused to wed again, and they could hardly force him. Duncan's father had settled for trying to get him to be intimate with a woman, but it seemed that Circenn Brodie had taken another of his absurd oaths and sworn off intimacy.

Circenn's origins were lost in the mists of time, and the few times Duncan had

questioned him about how he'd come to be immortal, the laird had grown taciturn, refusing to discuss it. But while sharing excessive quantities of whisky with Circenn one night, Duncan had come to understand a bit of why Circenn had decided not to become involved with another woman. Two hundred and twenty-eight years ago, Circenn's second wife had died at the age of forty-eight, and Circenn had admitted, in a whisky-induced confidence, that he simply refused to watch another wife die.

"So, just tup every now and then," Duncan had offered.

Circenn had sighed. "I cannot. I cannot seem to keep my heart from following where my body goes. If I am interested enough in a woman to take her to my bed, I want more of her. I want her out of my bed, too."

Duncan had been shaken by that comment. "So spend time with her until it wears off," he'd said easily.

Circenn had shot him a dark look. "Have you never met a woman with whom it did not wear off? A woman with whom you went to sleep at night, with the scent of her in your nostrils, and woke up in the morning wanting her as badly as you wanted to breathe?"

"Nay," Duncan had assured him. "Lasses are merely lasses. You attribute too much significance to it. It is simply tugging."

But it was not simply tugging to the laird of Brodie, and Duncan knew that. Lately, "simply tugging" wasn't scratching Duncan's endless itch, either. He wondered if it might be related to aging—that as a man grew older, indiscriminate intimacy began to chafe rather than to soothe.

Recently, Duncan had surprised himself by lingering with a wench past the duration of their physical intimacy, prolonging the afterglow, even asking questions besides "When is your husband expected back?"

Damned unnerving was what that was.

He shrugged, pushing the thought from his mind with a more pleasurable musing about Circenn. He had bet Galan his best horse that Circenn couldn't bring himself to kill the woman from the future, and it was a bet he planned to collect on. The laird of Brodie needed to come back to life, and perhaps the unusual lass

was the one to help him do it.

* * *

Lisa sat in the window of her room in Circenn's chambers, gazing out at the afternoon. Behind a thick bank of clouds, the sun had passed midpoint and begun its slow descent toward the ocean. She instinctively glanced at her wrist to see what time it was and realized she didn't have her watch on. She tried to recall if she'd had it on at the museum but wasn't certain. She often took it off and put it in her coat pocket when she cleaned, so it wouldn't get wet or dirty. She imagined she must have done so two nights ago and, caught up in her current mess, simply hadn't thought about it since then.

She inhaled deeply, enjoying the crisp, salt air. *I'm at Dunnottar*, she thought, her amazement in no way diminished by twenty-four consecutive hours in the keep. She'd seen pictures of it, and one in particular had been etched into her memory, a black-and-white shot in which the enormous bluff towered up from the misty sea. It had looked a gothic, romantic place, and more than once Lisa had dreamed of someday going to Scotland to see it. She knew from the photo that the bluff was surrounded by ocean on three sides, connected to the mainland by a land bridge that she surmised was behind the keep. She knew also that Dunnottar had been taken by the English repeatedly, then reclaimed by the Scots, and that the Bruce had developed the habit of burning down every Scottish castle he reclaimed to prevent the English from taking it again.

Lisa had studied this period of history, snatching time to read on the shuttle bus, and had mourned the loss of so many glorious castles, but she conceded that the Bruce had been smart to do what he'd done. The Scots had built cleverly defensible castles; when the English took them, their men became nearly invincible. By destroying the stone keeps, the Bruce forced the battles led by Edward II to build their own fortresses, which were not nearly as defensible. While the English wasted an immense amount of time and resources building their own strongholds in Scotland, the Bruce gained time to replenish his forces and rouse the country.

This is 1314 Scotland! Lisa marveled. There would be a decisive battle at Bannockburn only a few months away, in which the Bruce resoundingly defeated England, finally turning the war in Scotland's favor.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. Rising quickly, she tripped

over the hem of her gown. At least this one fit her, she thought, but it certainly was uncomfortable. She suspected that part of Circenn's desire to see her properly attired was because she wouldn't be able to climb walls in such clothing. "Coming," she said, snatching a wad of the fabric in her hand. She raised it from the floor, crossed the room, and opened the door.

A man clad in a plaid of gray and cobalt stood in the doorway. His muscular arms were brown and bare, and he had the highly developed musculature of a dancer. There wasn't one ounce of flesh on his body that wasn't necessary. His dark hair was loose around his face and brushed his shoulders. He wore a braid at each temple, and when he grinned he flashed straight white teeth, although his nose looked as if it had been broken a time or two. His alert, mischievous dark eyes studied her, and his sensual mouth curved appreciatively.

"I am Duncan Douglas, lass. Circenn asked me to teach you a bit about our time so you might fit in." His gaze traveled the length of her body. "I see they found a gown that fits you. You look lovely, lass."

"Come in," Lisa said, feeling a bit short of breath. While Duncan didn't compare to Circenn Brodie, she knew a dozen women in her time who would have gone absolutely nuts over him.

Duncan entered and glanced about the room. "By Dagda, it's as tidy as all his chambers." He snorted. "Doona you wish to mess things up in here a bit? Maybe nudge the tapestry so it hangs crooked? Invite spiders in, to weave great drooping cobwebs in the corners and collect dust? Assuming, of course, dust possessed the effrontery to gather in the laird of Brodie's chambers. At times I suspect even the elements dare not cross him." He walked to the perfectly covered bed with the neatly folded throws. Plunging his arms beneath the covers, he pushed them into a ball. "Wouldn't you like to just rumple the bed a bit and defy his sense of order?"

Lisa begrudged a smile. It was reassuring to hear someone poke fun at the disciplined laird of Brodie. The neatness of the room *had* annoyed her. The bed had been so tightly tucked that she'd had to peel the blankets down to sleep in it last night. She'd left them in a tangle, but when she'd returned from descending the wall, it had been perfectly remade, daring her to sleep so wantonly again. "Yes," she agreed.

"Aye," he corrected. "Aye and nay and tup and doona."

"I hardly think I will be using the word tup," she said, embarrassed.

He looked her up and down. "Well, you should. You are a lovely lass, and if ever I met a man who needed to tup, it is Circenn Brodie."

Lisa quickly masked her surprise. She'd perceived the laird as a man who would tup with great frequency. "It almost sounds as if you're encouraging me. Don't you wish to kill me too?"

Duncan snorted and, pushing the blankets into a comfortable pillow, dropped himself onto the bed. "Unlike Circenn and my brothers, I doona see everything in terms of plots and counterplots. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. I consider people innocent, unless proven guilty. Your appearance with the flask does not necessarily signify guilt. Besides, he said you handed the flask over to him when he asked for it." He eyed her thoughtfully. "He said you stumbled upon it in a place that displays artifacts. You must be quite shocked by all of this."

"Thank you," Lisa exclaimed. "You're the only person who has given any thought to how I must feel."

"I always consider how a woman feels," he replied smoothly.

Lisa had no doubt of that, but she sensed that entering a flirtatious conversation with Duncan Douglas might be a street with no U-turns permitted. So she guided the conversation back to Circenn. "He would realize I'm an innocent victim if he ever stopped growling at me and stomping about. All I want is to return home. I didn't choose to come here. I need to be back home."

"Why? Have you a lover there for whom your heart pines?"

"Hardly. But I have responsibilities—"

"Och!" Duncan interrupted, waving a hand. "Doona say that word to me. I loathe that word, I detest that word. It is a foul-tasting word."

"And a very important word," Lisa said. "There are things that I must take care of back in my time. Duncan, you must persuade him to send me back."

"Lass, Circenn cannot send you back. He cannot sift time. He may have some unusual qualities, but sending people through time is not counted among them."

"Would the flask send me back?" she asked quickly, studying Duncan carefully for his reaction. The man's face grew as shuttered as Circenn's had when she'd mentioned it to him.

"Nay," he said succinctly. "And I would not recommend bringing that up to Circenn. He is damned prickly about that flask and you will only succeed in inciting his suspicions should you inquire after it. A large part of what proclaims your innocence to him is that you relinquished it so easily."

Lisa sighed inwardly. Great; so when she went searching for it, if she was caught it would only make her look guilty. "You know of no way I can return home?" she pressed.

Duncan eyed her curiously. "Why do wish to go back so badly? Is it so distasteful here? When I saw you gazing out the window earlier, you were watching the sea with an expression of pleasure. It seemed you found this country beautiful. Was I wrong?"

"No, I mean nay, you weren't wrong, but that's not the point."

"If you will not tell me what it is you are so desperate to return to, I am afraid I cannot feel much sympathy for you," Duncan said.

Lisa expelled a breath and glanced away. She might cry if she started talking about Catherine. "Someone who loves me very much needs me right now, Duncan. I can't fail her."

"Her," he repeated, seeming pleased. "Who?"

Lisa glared at him. "Isn't that enough? Someone is depending on me. I can't let her down!"

Duncan studied her, measuring her. Finally he spread his hands in the air. "It grieves me, lass, but I cannot help you. I know of no way for you to return to your time. I suggest you confide whatever your plight is in Circenn—"

"But you said he couldn't return me," Lisa said quickly.

"Nay, but he is a fine listener."

"Ha! A turnip would listen better," she said and rolled her eyes.

"Judge not the man you see on the surface, lass. There are depths and there are depths to Circenn Brodie. Think you he will kill you?"

Lisa saw in his dark eyes the assurance that Circenn Brodie would not. "He can't bring himself to do it, can he?"

"What do you think?"

"I think he abhors the thought of it. Although he stomps and glowers, I think he's more angry at himself than me most of the time."

"Clever lass," Duncan said. "He is indeed angry because he's torn between oaths. I doona believe he truly thinks you are a spy, or guilty of something. If anything, he's angry at himself for swearing the oath in the first place. Circenn has never broken his word before, and it does not sit well with him. It will take him time to accept what he perceives as a failure. Once he does so, he will not hold any oath above your life, consequences be damned."

"Well, that's a relief," Lisa said. It occurred to her that perhaps Circenn and his friend were merely playing "good cop, bad cop" but she didn't think so. She regarded Duncan curiously. "Don't you have questions about what my time is like? I would if I were you."

Duncan's expression turned serious. "I am a man who is content with his lot in life, lass. I have no wish to know the future, no desire to meddle. A small slice of a small life is good enough for me. Such things are best left alone. The less I know about your time, the more we can work to help you adapt to my time. Speaking of your century would only keep it alive for you, and, lass, since I know of no way to return you, I would advise against clinging to any memories."

Lisa took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. "Then teach me, Duncan," she said sadly. "But I will be honest with you: I have no intention of giving up. If there is a way home for me, I will find it."

Circenn paced the courtyard, kicking irritably at the loose stones. The terrace needed to be repaired, he noted, as did the keep itself. He was tired of living in

half-burned-out castles, not because of the lack of amenities—that scarcely bothered him—but because the general chaos and disrepair of Dunnottar too accurately mirrored his own condition.

He eyed the cornerstone of the keep. During the last siege, the great stone that supported the tower had been pushed off center, causing the wall above it to list dangerously. And he felt just like that—his cornerstone was askew and his entire fortress dangerously weakened.

No more, he thought. He had uttered his last lie, broken his last rule.

He had given matters serious consideration and decided that Duncan's loophole indeed protected him from actually breaking his oath. He would accept that slight bending of his rules. Should Adam someday show up, he would simply point out to him that he hadn't killed her *yet*.

But lying about who she was, and entertaining the notion of becoming physically intimate with her... ah, those were unacceptable. He would not utter one more lie, nor would he permit himself to be tempted by her.

Sighing, he headed for the outer courtyard, resolved to take one of the feistiest stallions out for a punishing ride. As he loped down the rocky slope, he noted a cloud of dust spiraling beyond the land bridge behind the keep, at the same moment as his guard cried a warning.

Narrowing his eyes, he studied the approaching dust cloud. His body tensed, eager for a battle. It would do good to fight right now, to conquer, to reaffirm his identity as a warrior. As the first riders crested the ridge, the adrenaline flooding his body altered swiftly to dismay, and then to something akin to desperation.

The banner of Robert the Bruce was splayed between his standard bearers, announcing his arrival to relieve Circenn's men and send them home to Brodie.

And as for his last lie having been told, he thought sardonically, *Hmph!* Here came the lass's "cousin" himself.

CHAPTER 11

CIRCENN RODE LIEK A MAN POSSESSED—OR PERHAPS, HE thought, aggrieved, more accurately *obsessed* with a long-legged, unpredictable woman—to intercept the Bruce before he could reach the keep. As he rode, he marveled over how his one wee decision not to kill her yet had created dozens of problems. Each time he tried to address one of those problems, he succeeded only in creating a new set of problems. Committed thus far, he could not turn back. He dared not stop perpetuating the lies he'd begun without exposing her to risk.

Robert raised his hand in greeting and quickly broke off from his troops, his personal guard falling back a few paces, but not leaving his side. Directing the bulk of his men toward the keep, he kicked his horse into a gallop.

Circenn's gaze swept over the king's guard. Instinctively, he dropped his chin, looking up from beneath his brows. No hint of a smile touched his face. In warrior's language, the look—head lowered, eyes unwaveringly fixed—was a challenge. Circenn assumed the posture subconsciously, his blood responding to the two men flanking his king. It was the simple and timeless instinct of a wolf when confronted by another mighty wolf stalking the same territory. Nothing personal, just a need to assert his masculinity and superiority, he thought with an inward grin.

When Circenn had last seen Robert, the king had not had these two men with him. Their presence meant that the deepest Highland clans were now folly in the forefront of the war. Circenn was pleased that his king merited two of the legendary warriors to-protect him. They were massive men with eyes of preternatural blue marking them as what they were—Berserkers.

"Circenn." Robert greeted him with a smile. "It has been too long since last we met. I see Dunnottar is still the ruin I left last fall." His gaze played across the overgrown landscape, the piles of rocks, the blackened stones of the keep.

"Welcome, milord. I hope you have come to tell us it is time to join forces with your men," Circenn said pointedly. "Since Jacques de Molay was burned a fortnight past, my Templars are seething with the need to do battle. I doona know how much longer I can placate them with minor missions."

Robert shook his head, a wry smile curving his mouth. "You are as impatient as ever, Circenn. I'm certain you'll manage to rein in their tempers, as you always do. Your Templars serve me better in their stealthy, circumspect missions than on the front for the now. The dozen I've slipped into my troops have done remarkable things. I trust you will keep the rest ready for my command." He gestured to his guard. "I believe you know Niall and Lulach McIlloch."

Circenn inclined his head. As his gaze moved over the McIlloch brothers, he smiled with anticipation. One move from either of them and he would be off his mount and at their throats. Admittedly the brawl would end in laughter, but every time he saw these two men he reacted the same way. They were the strongest warriors he'd ever trained with, and fighting with them was as exhilarating as it was futile. He could no more take a Berserker than a Berserker could take him. Their fights ended in a draw every time. Of course, that was one on one. Circenn had no doubt that if ever both of them combined forces they would bring him down with little effort unless he used magic.

"Brodie," Lulach said with a nod.

"Perhaps we'll have time for swordplay before you ride to Brodie," Niall offered. "I think you could use another lesson," he provoked.

"And you think you can teach me one?" He'd love nothing more than to channel his frustration into a challenging fight, but his mind was consumed with the problem at hand. "Perhaps later." He dismissed them from his thoughts and turned to Robert. "May we speak in private, milord?"

The Bruce nodded to Niall and Lulach. "Go on with you. I am well guarded with Brodie. I will join you shortly."

Circenn knelt his horse around and he and Robert rode in silence to the edge of the cliff. Robert looked out to the sea, breathing deeply of the chill, salty air. The waves crashed against the rocks below, sending silver plumes of foam spraying up the cliffs.

"I love this place. It is wild and full of power. Each time I visit Dunnottar I feel it seeping into my veins and leave renewed."

"This bluff does have that effect," Circenn agreed.

"But perhaps what I sense is nothing more than the ghostly courage of the many men who have died defending this coveted rock." Robert was silent for a moment, and

Circenn knew he was brooding over the numbers of Scotsmen who had fallen and would continue to fall before their country was free.

Circenn waited until Robert roused himself from his thoughts. "Yet it does not compare with Castle Brodie, does it? You must be eager to return."

"More eager to join the battle," Circenn said quickly. Weary of holding critical sites, tired of protecting and running messages, he needed to bury his frustration in the all-consuming heat of battle.

"You know I need you in other places, Circenn. You also know the Templars are hunted for the price on their heads. Although I have given them sanctuary, parading them out in force would invite an attack before I'm ready. Mine have shaved their beards and doffed their tunics, masquerading as Scots. Do yours still cling to their ways?"

"Aye, they have a hard time breaking any of their rules. But I might be able to persuade them, if they thought they would be permitted to wage war. We could help take back some of the castles," Circenn pointed out irritably.

"You help me best precisely where I have you. I will summon your private forces to battle when I am ready and no sooner. But I doona wish to argue, Circenn. Tell me what is weighing upon your mind so heavily that you rode out to greet me with unusually grim countenance, even for you."

"I need to request a favor from you, milord."

Robert quirked a brow at him. "Formality between us in private, Circenn? With our past?"

Circenn smiled faintly. "Robert, I need ask of you a boon, and that you not question me, but simply grant it."

Robert angled his horse closer to Circenn's and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Do you mean trust you as you trusted me so many years ago when I'd fought for Longshanks against my own motherland? Do you mean grant you my faith as

unwaveringly as you granted me yours when you had no reason to believe I wouldn't cross the lines and go back to England again?" Robert's mouth curved in a bitter smile. "Circenn, not too long ago you gave me reason to believe in myself. When you came at my summons I knew naught of you but that you were rumored to be the fiercest warrior in all the lands. I believed that with you behind me, I could regain Scotland's freedom. You came to me, and you gave me your fealty when I did not deserve it. You had no reason to trust me—yet you did, and in the strength of your faith I rediscovered my own. Since that day I have come to believe that I have earned a place in this land again. Ask. Ask me and it is yours."

Robert's words had the impact of a fist in Circenn's gut. His king gave him his faith and trust, and he was asking Circenn to help him break a vow and perpetuate a lie. What would Robert say if he knew the truth?

Circenn expelled a breath. "It is a woman," he said finally. "I need you to claim her as your cousin, and when you meet her to pretend it is the renewal of an old acquaintance. Cousin by blood—Lisa MacRobertson."

Robert laughed. His eyes sparkled and he whistled. "With pleasure. It is long past time you took a wife and had sons to continue your line. This land needs your blood to fight for our freedom."

"It is not that kind of—"

"Please!" Robert raised his hands. "I see in your eyes what kind of situation it is. I see passion I have seen only in battle. I also see discomfort, which tells me you have deep feelings about this matter. And since I haven't seen any feeling in you for far too long, I am pleased. It is done. I am eager to reacquaint myself with my 'cousin.'"

Deep feelings indeed, Circenn thought morosely. *Deep disgust with myself*. But if Robert needed to believe there was marriage interest in order to acknowledge her, so be it. The end result was what mattered. In a few hours, he, his men, and Lisa would be on their way to Brodie, and Robert would have no more involvement in the issue. She need never know he had secured the king's cooperation by leading him to believe he cared for her. Circenn remained silent, wallowing in his guilt, ashamed that his king trusted him so readily.

"Do you recall when we were in the caves in the valley of North Esk?" Robert asked, his gaze on the horizon.

"Aye."

"It was the blackest hour of my life. I had warred against my own motherland for wealth, land, and Longshanks' promise that he would spare my clan. Whether from sharing too much whisky with you, or inspired by a moment of divine clarity, I saw myself as I was—a traitor to my own people. Do you recall the spider?"

Circenn smiled. *Did he recall the spider?* He'd coaxed it in, compelled it to perform its feat before Robert's eyes as he lay healing from battle wounds, and in watching the spider try time and again to weave a web across a span of futility, Robert had remembered his own strength and determination. When the spider had succeeded on the seventh try, Robert the Bruce had dragged his battered body and soul from the damp soil of the cave and shaken his fist toward the sky, and the battle to liberate Scotland had begun in earnest.

Robert regarded him intently. "I have never seen a spider of that kind, before or since. One almost wonders if it was a natural occurrence. I do not question some things, Circenn. Now take me to your woman."

* * *

After Duncan left her chamber, Lisa waited three minutes, impatiently tapping her foot, then ventured into the hall, determined to track down the flask. She'd made it no more than halfway down the corridor when Duncan came storming back up the stairs.

"I thought you'd left," she exclaimed.

"I did. Then I looked out the window. We have a problem and I suggest you pack."

"Pack what? I don't have anything!"

"Circenn's things. Put them in the chests and the men will load them. We'll be riding out very soon. As soon as we can possibly manage. As soon as I can sneak you out of the castle," he muttered, glancing nervously about.

"To where?" she exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

Duncan stalked to her side, took her none-too-gently by the arm, and steered her back down the hall and into Circenn's chambers. "I am not going to ask what you were doing outside of your room. I feel better not knowing. But, lass, as I glanced out the window I saw your 'cousin' arriving to relieve our post at Dunnottar. Unless you wish to encounter him and reminisce over old times that never happened, I suggest you keep out of sight and do as I tell you. Would you please indulge me and exercise blind obedience now? It may keep you alive."

"Would someone really try to harm me if they knew I was from the future?"

Duncan's expression was glum. "The Templars doona trust women, they doona care for Druid magic, and they feel there is never a reason to break an oath. Should they discover Circenn lied about you, they will lose faith in him, and if they do that, he will not be in much of a position to protect you. Not to mention the fact that the Bruce will also wonder who you are. Then it will come out that you are from the future, and och—I doona even wish to think about it. We must hide you."

"I'll pack," she offered hastily.

"Good lass." Duncan whirled around and raced back down the corridor.

* * *

Lisa finished packing in fifteen minutes, having simply thrown everything that wasn't too heavy to move into the many chests scattered about the room. Afterward, she paced between the door and the window for another ten minutes, trying to convince herself that she must not, under any circumstances, leave the room.

It wasn't working. In the keep just below her room, there were legends walking, talking, planning. Unable to resist the lure of the voices of history, she slipped from the chamber and followed the noise to the balcony that encircled the Greathall. With no roof, the hall was freezing but the men didn't seem to notice, nor did any of them look up, as they were far too engrossed in battle plans. She lurked abovestairs, surreptitiously watching from behind the balustrade, prepared to duck and cower at any moment. She knew Duncan would strangle her if he had an inkling of the risk she was taking, but the lure was irresistible: How many

twenty-first-century women could lay claim to watching Robert the Bruce plan the ousting of England, battle by battle?

Not that anyone would believe her, but there he was, standing below her, pacing, bending over maps and gesturing angrily, orating, breathing, inspiring. His voice, rich and strong, was persuasive and full of passion. God in heaven, she was watching Robert the Bruce plan to vanquish England! Chills raced up her spine.

"Milady, would you like to reacquaint yourself with your cousin?" a man said behind her.

Lisa winced. She hadn't considered that someone might venture upstairs, or have *been* upstairs before she'd come out. She'd been so worried about someone beneath her looking up that she hadn't devoted any attention to the stairs. This man must have slipped up while her fascinated gaze had been focused on the king. Heart hammering, she turned slowly to see who had discovered her spying, hoping that whoever it was could be persuaded not to tell Duncan or anyone else.

It was one of the knights she'd glimpsed in the courtyard earlier as she'd watched them train. He sank swiftly to one knee. "Milady," he murmured, "I am Armand Berard, a knight in your protector's service. Shall I escort you belowstairs?"

The knight rose to his feet and she noted that although they were identical in height, his neck and shoulders were as thick as a football player's. His chestnut-brown hair was close cropped; his gray eyes were serious and intelligent. A thick beard covered his jaw, and she glimpsed the flash of a crimson cross beneath his multiple tunics.

"No... er... nay, I am fair certain he's too busy for me."

"Robert the Bruce is never too busy for clan," he said. "It is one of the many things I admire about him. Come." He extended his hand. "I will take you to him."

"Nay!" she exclaimed, then added more gently, "Circenn advised me to stay in my room and he'll be upset should he discover I've disobeyed. He said he would see to it I had time to speak with my cousin later."

"He will not be upset with you. Never fear, milady. Come. The Bruce will be eager to see you again, and smitten by the king's pleasure, the laird of Brodie will forgive your transgression. It is only natural you would be overjoyed to see your cousin again. Come."

He latched a hand around her wrist and leaned over the balustrade.

"Milord!" he called down to the Greathall. "I bring your cousin to you!"

Robert the Bruce looked up, a curious expression on his face.

CHAPTER 12

LISA FROZE. THIS WAS IT, SHE RUED. CIRCENN BRODIE might have permitted her to live, but her curiosity had just delivered the fatal blow. First, her curiosity had led her to try to get a job in a museum, so she could learn. Then her curiosity had compelled her to open the chest and touch the flask; and finally, her curiosity had led her from her room, into the middle of a deadly situation. She was doomed.

She flinched when Armand Berard took her hand and looped it through his elbow. Her shoulders slumped in defeat, her chin slipped a notch. *Never let anyone take your dignity, Lisa, Catherine* whispered in her mind. *Sometimes it is all one has.*

Her chin shot back up. If she was going to her death, by God, she would do it regally. During all her suffering her mother had never relinquished her dignity, and Lisa would do no less. Inclining her head, she smoothed her gown and straightened her spine.

It seemed to take forever to descend the few dozen stairs. The hall was jammed with Templars and the Bruce's travel-weary men, and nearly a hundred warriors gazed curiously up at her, including the furious glare of one warlord who definitely looked like he wanted her dead, and the inquisitive gaze of the king of Scotland.

She pasted a defiant smile on her lips. As they reached the bottom, the dark-haired king broke away from the crowd. He moved toward her, his arms extended.

"Lisa," he exclaimed. "How lovely to see you again. You have blossomed under Circenn's care, but I suspected you would."

He wrapped her in a fierce hug, and her face was buried in a thick beard that smelled of wood smoke from camping in the open country. She pressed close, concealing her stunned expression in his cheek. Circenn must have gotten to him first, she realized. He squeezed her so tightly, she nearly squeaked. When he fondly patted her rump, she did squeak, and tried to draw away. He was grinning at her.

Close to her ear, he whispered, "Doona fash yourself, lassie. Circenn told me all. I am pleased he has chosen a wife."

Wife? She squeaked again as her knees weakened. *Surely that oversized, scowling barbarian didn't think she would marry him just to stay alive?* She glanced over the Bruce's shoulder and saw Circenn standing five paces behind him, eyeing her with a glare that wordlessly instructed, *Obey. Behave.*

On second thought... "Did he tell you that? He promised me he wouldn't announce it yet," she lied glibly. If that was what Circenn had told him, and it would keep her alive, she'd go along with it for the moment. There would be ample time to amend things later.

"Nay, lass, he didn't say it. His eyes did."

Whose eyes has he been looking at? she wondered, because the only eyes she'd seen held murder in their depths.

The Bruce smiled broadly. "May you be as fertile as the hare. We need dozens of his sons in this land." He laughed and patted her abdomen.

Lisa blushed, concerned that he might pat her breasts and inquire about her nursing abilities. She'd just been patted more familiarly by the king of Scotland than she'd been touched by any man, save Circenn.

"Does your clan breed well?"

"Uh... aye," she said brightly, with another blush.

The Bruce hooked an arm behind him and drew Circenn forward, hugging them together. For a moment, her cheekbone was smashed against Circenn's chest. After a few moments of the most uncomfortable group hug she'd ever been subjected to, the Bruce flung back his head and yelled, "I give you my cousin, Lisa MacRobertson!"

The Bruce stepped back, nudging them closer together. He took Lisa's hand and curled her fingers into her palm, making a fist. Ignoring her look of confusion, he placed her balled fist in Circenn's large hand. Lisa's gaze flew to Circenn's face and she saw the fury there, though the king seemed oblivious to it.

"It is with great pleasure I give this lass, my beloved cousin, hand-in-fist, to my favored laird and knight in our blessed cause, Circenn Brodie, along with four additional manors outlying his demesne. The wedding will be at Brodie when we meet there in three months' time. *Hail the future mistress of Brodie!*" Robert roared, smiling at them both.

Circenn's hand clenched around her fist. As the hall erupted into cheers, the look he turned on her was venomous.

"Don't you dare look at me like that! I didn't tell him that," she hissed. "*You're* the one who told him that."

Circenn took advantage of the momentary chaos and pulled her into his arms. His mouth to her hair, he growled in a brogue thickened by anger, "I did *not* tell him that. The king decided, wholly independent of me, so, lass, if you truly can be leaving this century, I suggest you set your mind to determining how to do so, long before the third moon passes. Or you'll be finding yourself wed to me, and I promise, lass, you will not fare well for it."

"A kiss to seal it, Brodie!" the Bruce cried.

Only Lisa saw the fierce look on his face before he kissed her punishingly.

* * *

Galan found Duncan lying on the floor of the kitchen, clutching his sides. Every few seconds he drew a deep, wheezing breath, stuttered, then lost himself again in waves of laughter.

Galan watched him repeat the ridiculous sequence several times before nudging him with the toe of his boot. "Would you *stop* it," he said disgustedly.

Duncan gasped, pounding his chest with his fist, then collapsed again into guffaws. "D-did—*ah-hahaha*—did you see his f-face?" Duncan roared, holding his stomach.

Galan's lips twitched, and he bit the bottom one to remain serious. "This is a fankle, Duncan," Galan chastised. "Now he's nearly handfasted to the wench."

Duncan's only response was another roar of laughter. "N-nearly? H-he is!"

"I doona know what you think is so amusing about this. Circenn is going to be furious."

"But he's st-stuck!" Duncan gasped between near-sobs of laughter. Then he rose to his feet, took several great breaths, and finally managed to subdue his laughter for the moment, yet the corners of his mouth twitched furiously.

"Doona you see what must have happened, Galan? Circenn must have requested the Bruce acknowledge her, and the king—knowing Circenn is of Brude descent—assumed Circenn wished her to be of royal alliance so he might wed her. So, Robert took it a little further, kindly thinking he was clearing the way for the woman to be accepted as his wife. Thinking he was giving Circenn exactly what he wanted."

"Oh, really?" a cool voice said.

Duncan and Galan both sobered to immediate attention.

"Milord." They nodded respectfully.

"You underestimate me," Robert the Bruce said softly.

"Where's Circenn?" Galan asked, glancing warily behind the Bruce.

"I left Circenn in the Greathall, accepting congratulations with his new lady on his arm," Robert said smugly. "Think you I doona know the man has taken one of his ridiculous oaths not to wed?"

Duncan gazed at the king admiringly. "You clever bastard."

"Duncan!" Galan roared. "You doona address the king as such!"

Robert raised his hand and grinned. "Your brother has called me worse, as I have him, besotted with whisky and wenches. He and I understand each other well, Galan. In fact, it was while wenching with your brother at Edinburgh that we discussed this very concern. It is no longer a concern, is it? I fixed what most of your clan has not been able to fix for years." Robert looked enormously pleased with himself.

Galan glared at Duncan. "That's where you went when you said you were getting supplies? Wenching and drinking with the king? Have you no sense of

responsibility?"

Duncan smiled innocently. "Robert needed to alleviate some tension, and I know of no better way. And while we were being entertained most grandly by a few lasses, we discussed the fact that Circenn was getting no closer to making sons for Scotland. As Robert pointed out—he has managed to fix what none of us could. I, for one, am grateful."

Galan shook his head. "Circenn would kill us all if he suspected this wasn't a vast misunderstanding."

"But he'll never know, will he?" Robert said calmly.

Duncan burst into laughter again, and after a brief, startled look, Galan joined him.

* * *

"I am *not* marrying you," Circenn rumbled behind a flawless smile.

"I didn't *ask* you to," Lisa hissed back, a smile of spun glass bowing her lips.

With brittle displays of teeth, they glared at each other, while accepting congratulations from the various men standing in the hall. Each time they had a moment of near privacy, or their mouths and ears were pressed close together, one of them hissed at the other. To the room at large, they looked like a happily whispering couple.

"Doona think this changes a thing," he snapped, lips tautly stretched over his teeth.

"I'm not the one who told him a lie," Lisa snapped back, certain she appeared to be snarling. She smiled with effort.

"Congratulations, milord." Armand Berard clapped Circenn's shoulder.

"Thank you," Circenn said, beaming as he forcefully pounded Armand on the shoulder.

Armand's brows dipped. "Why did you not tell us this morn, Circenn, when you told us who she was?"

Circenn didn't even pause before spilling another lie. Och, but they were coming fast and furious, with shocking ease. He managed a self-effacing smile. "I wasn't certain the king wished it announced, but it seems he was eager."

"Milady." Armand bowed low over her hand and kissed it. "We are pleased Circenn has chosen to settle down and begin a family. Although those of our order do not wed, we believe if a man is not going to take an oath of celibacy, he should take a wife. It keeps him humble and inclined toward sobriety."

Lisa smiled brightly at Armand. *Humble indeed*, she thought. There wasn't a humble bone in Circenn Brodie's body. Although, dislike him as she may, she wouldn't have minded searching for one.

"Where did he go?" Circenn growled, the moment Armand melted into the crowd.

"Armand?" Lisa asked blankly. "He's right there." She pointed to his retreating back.

"*Rrroberrrrt!* That traitorous bastard." His burr was so thick on the name that that the *rs* were a growl with a weak *t* at the end.

"How should I know where the king went?" Lisa rolled her eyes. "I'm the last person who ever knows what's going on around here."

"This entire fiasco is your fault for leaving your chamber! Did I not tell you to remain in your chamber? How many times did I tell you to remain in your chamber? Did I tell you at least a dozen times in the past two days *not to leave your chamber?*"

"Repeating the same question three times, in slightly different ways, does not make me more inclined to answer you. Don't talk to me as if I'm a child. And don't even think you're going to blame this one on me." Lisa sniffed and averted her face. "I certainly would never have told anyone I was marrying you. Leaving my chamber didn't get us betrothed. *You* did that all by yourself."

Circenn studied her through narrowed eyes, then lowered his head menacingly near hers. "Perhaps I will wed you, lass. Do you know that a wife must obey her husband in all things?" he purred against her ear. He stopped scowling abruptly. "Renaud!" He clapped another Templar on the shoulder and smiled painfully.

"We are pleased, milord," Renaud de Vichiers said formally.

"Thank you," Circenn replied. "If you will excuse me, Renaud, my betrothed is feeling a bit faint. She grows swiftly overtaxed." With a dismissive nod to Renaud, he whisked Lisa away from the crowd and pushed her into a corner of the hall, uncaring what anyone thought. For the moment, they were as alone as they could be in the crowded room.

"I do *not* grow swiftly overtaxed. I am the picture of calm, considering all I've been through. And I am *not* marrying you," she said defiantly.

His response chilled her blood: "In three months' time, lass, neither of us will have any choice. Now I will escort you to your room, and you will remain in it this time."

Glibly informing the room at large that his wife-to-be was overexcited by the commotion—a fib that Lisa resented because it made her appear fragile—Circenn guided her abovestairs, his hand a steely vise on her arm. He stopped at her door and informed her that if she left the room, he would ensure that she had extreme cause to regret it.

She opened the door and began to step in, when he suddenly spun her around into his arms.

Without a word, he closed his mouth over hers brutally.

Too shocked to resist, Lisa stood motionless, her lips parting at the insistence of his tongue. He darted it between her lips in blatant mimicry of sexual play, probing firmly, receding, only to thrust again. She tipped back her head, her body sparking to life. He was angry, she could feel it in the bruising crush of his lips, and it fed her own anger.

Then it occurred to her that kissing was quite a useful and fascinating way to express anger, so she worked diligently at putting every bit of her irritation and displeasure into her response. She bit, she nipped, she fought his tongue with hers. When his tongue withdrew, she followed it with hers and sucked it hard back into her mouth, priding herself on how nicely she won *that* battle. When he kissed her so deeply she couldn't breathe around it, she dropped her hands to his waist, then dipped lower, just to show him she was completely in control. *Tight,*

muscled ass; the thought was accompanied by a surge of excitement as she imagined his powerful hips tensing in a timeless rhythm.

When his teeth nudged against hers, a moan blossomed in her throat. She brought up her hands and plunged them into his hair, sliding her fingers through black silk. Her fingers moved down the nape of his neck, then she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back so uninhibitedly that he stiffened abruptly, stepped back, and gazed at her with a startled expression.

Briefly, he looked pleased, then his eyes narrowed swiftly. "I doona like you, and I will *not* tolerate you complicating my life."

"Ditto," she clipped through swollen lips.

"Then we understand each other," he said.

"Mm-hmm," she said. "Perfectly."

"Good."

They stared at each other. She noticed that his lips were slightly fuller. *She* had done that. Her own lips felt tingly, warm, and most assuredly not finished expressing her anger.

"Doona forget who's in control in this castle, lass," he snarled before stalking off down the hallway.

If that was how he asserted his control, she might just have to challenge his authority more often.

RISING...

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?*
—Shakespeare, Sonnet 53

CHAPTER 13

THE JOURNEY FROM DUNNOTTAR TO INVERNESS AND from there to Castle Brodie would live long in Lisa's memory. With dismay she tallied each day of their journey that ticked by, knowing it was one more day she was losing in the future, and the thought made her miserable. She feared that the farther they rode from Dunnottar, the slimmer her chances became of returning home. She knew it probably wasn't true, because if anything had the power to return her, it was the flask, and she suspected Circenn wouldn't permit it out of his care. Still, each step she took deeper into his lush, wild land made her feel she was moving a step farther away from her own life, farther into a realm in which she had no control and might lose herself entirely.

Shortly after Circenn had deposited her in her room—or more accurately left her reeling in the hallway—he'd sent Duncan and Galan to whisk her out of the keep, and the three of them had ridden off ahead. Circenn and the rest of his entourage had joined them hours later. She was acutely aware that the knights studied her far too intently for her comfort. They were not men she wished to slip up around, so she spoke as little as possible, choosing her words with great caution.

The first night they journeyed across Scotland, a nearly full moon hung above the shadowy ridges and valleys, and the thunder of more than a hundred horses carrying packs and heavily muscled men was deafening. The ground trembled as they galloped the hills. Cold despite the thick plaid covering her gown, she was awed by the miles of untouched, open country. Although her body ached after riding only a few hours, she would have ridden all night to savor the untamed vista.

She was of a far different mind the next morning, though, and wouldn't have ridden at all had it been left to her discretion. She'd arrogantly thought she was in good condition, but riding a horse was quite different from rappelling or tumbling, and she quickly realized that her athletic skills had better trained her for falling off the horse properly than for staying on it with any degree of finesse.

The second thing that lingered in her mind was Circenn Brodie, who rode beside

her the entire way, not speaking, but watching every move she made, every expression. She hid her discomfort well, determined not to reveal any weakness to the indefatigable warrior. Since leaving Dunnottar the man had scarcely uttered two words to her, had not so much as touched her to help her dismount; she could tell he was seething. He moved away from her side occasionally to talk with his men in low voices.

In every village they passed through, she noted the people heralded Circenn as befitted royalty, and he comported himself with regal reserve. If he appeared a bit detached, none of the villagers seemed to mind. Children gazed at him with awe; old men clapped him on the shoulder and smiled proudly; the gazes of young warriors followed him admiringly. It was clear that the man was a legend in his own time. With each admiring, flirtatious glance flashed by a woman beneath lowered lids, Lisa felt a surge of irritation. In more than one village, women found a reason to approach him and try to lure him off "to discuss a most private matter, milord." She was relieved to see that none of them succeeded. However, she wasn't certain if it was because he genuinely wasn't interested or because they were riding so hard. They rarely slept more than a few hours each evening, but she was used to inadequate sleep from working two jobs.

The third thing that weighed upon her mind was the flask, which she now knew that Circenn had with him, because she'd caught a glimpse of it one night as he rummaged in his satchel. Unfortunately he was such a light sleeper that trying to get the flask while he was asleep would be a fool's venture. Better to bide her time, waiting for the right moment.

It was the last night of their ride, however, that would live longest in her memory—the night they approached the perimeter of Castle Brodie. Throughout the physically punishing journey, Lisa had worried about Catherine, wondering who was taking care of her, weeping silently under cover of darkness. All the while Scotland was subtly invading her veins, and despite her fear and feelings of helplessness, she knew she was falling in love.

With a country.

It was too early for spring in the Highlands, but she could sense the dormant earth waiting to burst into bloom. Although she knew she must find a way home, part of her ached to remain in the past long enough to glimpse the valleys filled with heather, to watch the golden eagles fly above the mountains, to see the

carpet of bracken and brush turn lush and bud with spring.

The final night of their journey, the weather warmed slightly. Due to exhaustion, her emotions bubbled dangerously near the surface, and in the past few hours she'd gone from euphoria over the beauty of the Highland night to utter terror at what her future might hold. Lisa wasn't certain what she had expected of Castle Brodie but it wasn't the elegant stone structure she'd caught glimpses of from the tops of distant hills, as she'd strained in her saddle to see as much as possible.

They descended into a valley, and the castle was again hidden from sight. The silence was broken only by the beat of hooves against the sod and the occasional sighs of men glad to be returning home. The sky was deep royal blue, minutes from becoming black—it was "gloaming," their word for twilight. The path they were traveling climbed a ridge that stretched across the horizon, and beyond it lay Circenn's home. As they topped the crest, her gaze swept up and she sighed at the sight that greeted her.

Castle Brodie was as magnificent as the man who owned the palatial structure. Brilliantly lit by torches, it seemed something from a dream. Beyond an arched gate that gleamed palely in the moonlight rose a structure of square towers and turrets, high spires, and low walkways connecting the various wings. A great wall encircled the estate, and with the gate shut, it would be an insurmountable fortress. Guards stalked the parapets and paced the perimeter. She could just imagine the dozens of servants and their families inside, scurrying to and fro, their children's laughter filling the air. Safe. Warm and surrounded by clan, governed by a warlord who committed his life to protecting them.

Lisa felt a twinge of impossible longing. What a life this was. Someday he would wed in truth and carry his wife home to this magical place. This was his world—this magnificent castle shining pale gray in the moonlight, these men surrounding him who fought on his command and would lay down their lives for him. *What an incredible world to be part of*, she thought.

She felt torn. Her need to get back home battled an overwhelming desire to belong in a place like this, to be surrounded by family.

Exhausted beyond the ability to deceive herself any longer, Lisa confronted a truth she'd been trying desperately to avoid.

She knew she had no real future to look forward to in either place or time.

* * *

Circenn cornered Duncan and Galan in the stables of Castle Brodie. He backed them against a wall with the sheer force of his glare.

"I heard you laughing, Duncan," he accused, a muscle twitching in his jaw. Circenn had been simmering for the past week, seeing the amused light in Duncan's eyes, hearing his laughter, and unable to reprimand him in front of the Templars. Already his Templars had directed curious glances his way, puzzled by his sullen temper on the journey.

Duncan was the portrait of innocence. "If you mean on the trip here, Galan and I were merely reciting bawdy poems, nothing more."

"Galan?" Circenn snorted disbelievingly. "Galan could not recite a bawdy poem if the outcome of a battle depended upon it."

"I could," Galan protested. "I am not quite as bad as you make me out to be."

"Do you realize that I am utterly compromised? Do you realize that I made a pledge to Adam to kill her and to Robert to marry her?" Circenn demanded irritably.

Duncan's amusement didn't diminish one whit. "Considering that Adam isn't allowed to visit you without invitation—that was part of your deal, if you recall—it sounds to me as if you'd better wed the lass. She could be long dead by the time Adam comes to bother you again. You said sometimes fifty years pass without him troubling you."

Circenn stiffened. *She could be dead...* He didn't like the thought of her dead, either by his hand or by natural causes. Even if he never fulfilled his oath, she would die long before he would. As everything else, passing away before his eyes. As he would one day bury Duncan, whose hair would gray, bones would brittle, and eyes would fog by time. He would weep over the loss of such irreverence and enthusiasm for life, a heart so full of joy. And he would bury Galan, and Robert and his servants and maids. And his horses, and any pets he might be foolish enough to love.

For that reason, it had been centuries since he'd permitted himself to sleep with a

avored wolfhound lying across the foot of his bed.

Unlike the mortal span most men lived, Circenn would encounter death not a dozen times, but a thousand, making him the greater fool if he cared about anything. Perhaps that was why Adam Black was so detached; after a thousand deaths he'd simply quit caring.

Circenn turned without another word, leaving his trusted advisers gaping after him.

* * *

Lisa stood in the middle of the courtyard, drinking in the sights. After a growled "Doona move," Circenn had gone tearing off after Duncan and Galan the moment they'd come through the gate. She'd been perfectly content not to move, because it meant she could direct all her awed attention to the castle. Knights surged around her in waves, tending to their horses and unpacking gear, while she scanned the elegant lines of the medieval castle.

The rectangular estate was enclosed by a mighty stone wall. In the northeast corner, a chapel was situated amid a small grove of trees. In the northwest corner, near the main wall, in which the gate was located, was a series of low outbuildings she assumed garrisoned the soldiers. She couldn't see past the castle, as it sprawled nearly the width of the walled estate. The perimeter wall tumbled up slopes and valleys, extending as far as she could see, intermittently set with guard towers every fifty yards or so.

When Circenn took her by the elbow, a few moments later, she started.

"Come," he said quietly.

She looked at him sharply. Instead of looking angry as he had during the week-long ride, now he looked sad. And it *bothered* her that he looked sad. Anger she could deal with, but sadness brought out her nurturing instincts and tempted her to draw him aside, cradle his face gently, and ask what was wrong. Get to know him. Soothe him.

She shook her head at her own idiocy. This was one man who clearly did not need her tenderness and nurturing.

They entered the main door of the castle and he moved away from her again,

into the midst of servants, quietly giving orders. Lisa stood in the Greathall, pivoting slowly, her mouth open. *Wow*. Over the past week, she'd begun assimilating some of their archaic expressions, but under some circumstances, only a thoroughly modern "wow" would do. Dunnottar had been a ruin; Castle Brodie was a medieval castle at its finest. The Greathall was vast, with a high ceiling and five hearths—two each on the east and west walls of the room, and a central hearth that looked as if it had long been inactive. The walls were hung with enormous tapestries, and a long, ornately carved table with dozens of chairs was positioned near one of the hearths.

She looked down, eager to see a rush-covered floor firsthand, but was disappointed to discover that the floor was of scrubbed pale-gray stone. There was an abundance of light in the room, and she recognized the "rushlights"—candles of wax and tallow impaled on vertical spikes in an iron candlestick with a tripod base. In the Cincinnati Museum, they'd had two authentic rushlights. Here, many were supported on wall brackets, while others sat on the tables scattered through the hall. Still others were set in iron loops, carried over the arms of servants.

"Your mouth is ajar," Circenn said beside her ear.

She blinked. "Yours would be too, if you suddenly found yourself in my home." He would certainly gawk over television, the radio, the Internet.

"Is it to your liking?" he asked stiffly.

"It's lovely," she breathed.

He permitted himself a small smile. "Come, they've prepared a chamber for you."

"During the past two minutes?" How efficient was his staff?

"I sent a scouting troop ahead, lass, and since they expect you to be my wife"—he grimaced—"they may have made quite a fuss. Doona mistake that for my doing. I could hardly deny my servants their... enthusiasm. They are likely beside themselves with pleasure that I am handfasted," he muttered dryly.

Without thinking, she laid a hand on his forearm, plagued by curiosity, her animosity temporarily forgotten. "Why haven't you wed before now?"

He glanced down at her hand on his arm. His gaze lingered overlong on her fingers. "What? Have you suddenly become interested in me?" he asked, with a mocking lift of a dark brow.

"I suppose when I saw you at Dunnottar, I saw you merely as a warrior, but here I see you—"

"As a man?" he finished for her, in a dangerous tone. "How intriguing," he murmured. "Foolish, but intriguing."

"Why is that foolish? You *are* a man. This is your home," she said. "Your men give you their trust and loyalty, your servants are pleased to see you return. This is a spacious castle, and you must be at least thirty or thirty-five. How old are you?" Her brow furrowed as she realized that she knew very little about this man.

Circenn regarded her impassively.

Impatiently she barreled on. "Have you never been married? Surely you intend to be someday, don't you? Don't you want children? Do you have brothers and sisters, or are you as solitary as you make yourself out to be?"

His eyes narrowed. "Lass, I am weary from the journey. Fabricate your own answers as they may please you. For the now, let me see you to your chamber, so I might get on with my other duties. If you would like to turn your mind to a puzzle, puzzle a way out of a formal wedding in less than three moons."

"I guess that means you can't kill me, doesn't it?" she said, half jesting.

He scowled. "Correct." Then, close to her ear so no one could overhear, he said, "How could I kill a royal cousin? How could I dispose of you when the Bruce has given you to me in marriage? We're handfasted now. We're nearly as good as wed. Killing you now would cause more problems for me than failing to fulfill my vow ever would have."

"So your oath—"

"Is well and truly broken," he finished bitterly.

"Is that why you've been looking so angry?"

"*Stop* asking questions!" he thundered.

"Sorry," Lisa said defensively.

He propelled her up the staircase by her elbow and deposited her at the entrance to her chamber, in the east wing.

"I'll have hot water sent up so you may refresh yourself. Stay in your room for the duration of the night, lass, or I may have to kill you anyway."

Lisa shook her head and began to turn toward the door.

"Give me your hands, lass."

She turned back toward him. "What?"

He extended his hands. "Place your hands in mine." It was not a request.

Lisa held out her hands warily.

Circenn closed them in his and locked his gaze with hers. He used his body, as was his way—a subtle leaning, a slight shifting, an unspoken dominance—to press her back against the stone wall beside the door, holding her gaze. Fascinated, she couldn't tear her eyes away from him.

When he stretched her hands above her head, she sucked in a worried breath.

He moved so slowly that, lulled by a false sense of security, she didn't utter a word. Gently, he brushed his lips against hers. It was incredibly intimate, being kissed so slowly and tenderly. Had he kissed her heatedly, it wouldn't have been nearly as devastating.

With excruciating leisure, he kissed her so slowly that she could hear a dozen of her own heartbeats between each slight alteration in the caress of his lips. She dropped her head back against the wall and closed her eyes, lost in the butterfly-light friction of his lips brushing hers as if he had all the time in the world. The castle suddenly seemed unnaturally silent, her breath uncommonly loud. If it was five minutes or fifteen that he kissed her in such a fashion, she had no way of knowing. She would have held still forever.

He captured her wrists with one hand and, with the other, he traced the contour

of her cheekbone. Her heart sank as she realized how close she was to being utterly seduced by his tantalizingly slow and delicious touches.

His fingers pressed at the corner of her mouth and her lips parted on a sigh of pleasure. He continued kissing her, but did not offer his tongue, and it was driving her mad. Slowly. Gently. With intimacy so prolonged that it made her aware of every nuance of what he was doing. He drew back, his gaze dark, and ran his finger across her lower lip. Instinctively, she touched his finger with her tongue.

With a husky groan, he cradled her head in his hands, closed his mouth over hers, and slipped a long velvety stroke of his tongue against hers. The moment she melted against him, he drew back sharply, spun on his heel, and stalked away.

Her lips tingled, and she touched the tips of her fingers to her mouth as he walked down the corridor. At the end of the hallway, he glanced back over his shoulder, and when he saw her standing there with her fingers pressed to her mouth, he flashed her a smile of masculine satisfaction. He *knew* the effect he had on her.

She stepped into her chamber and slammed the door shut.

* * *

Something had changed between them, she realized, during the ride from Dunnottar to Brodie. Or perhaps shortly after they'd arrived, when he'd left her side looking so angry and come back looking sad. He seemed more... human, less the ruthless savage. Or was she beginning to trust him, driven by the dawning realization that she had no one else to turn to?

Yawning and eager to stretch out on something besides the hard ground, she looked around the chamber. It was beautiful, the walls hung with palls of silk and tapestries that looked as if they'd been stolen from England. The thought amused her greatly, that Circenn decorated his castle with stolen English goods. Her bed, canopied with curtains of sheer ivory and covered with dozens of pillows, was so wide she could lie across it without her legs sticking off the edge. The headboard was a wonder of drawers and cubbyholes, and the maids had sprinkled the nooks and crannies with herbs and dried flowers.

Of course, they'd gone to such pains to make her chamber welcoming and bright because they thought she was going to be mistress of this castle, but she knew better. There was no way she would still be in the fourteenth century three months from now. It was simply not an option. Come tomorrow, she resolved sleepily, lulled by the wine she'd drunk and the gently burning fire, she would track down the flask and get back to her own time. She drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Lisa was running as fast as she could, chasing her mother through the halls of the hospital. She'd be able to catch up with her if the doctors would just quit pushing her bed so fast! Didn't they understand that Catherine needed her?

But if they did, they didn't care. They wound down one hallway and up the next, turned right and circled around, almost as if they were purposefully trying to elude her. The entire time she chased them, her mother was struggling to sit up, holding her hand out, reaching imploringly for her. Several times Lisa came within inches of grasping that fragile hand, only to lose it when the doctors picked up a sudden burst of speed.

Finally she closed in on them near the reception desk. The desk was situated in a corner, with an aisle all around it, but there was only one hallway open to the left. There was no way they could escape her. She would cut them off, by circling around to the left, and gather Catherine up—she weighed so little now!—and take her home, where she wanted to be.

But as she raced around and blocked the hallway, an elevator appeared in the previously solid wall, and the doctors rushed her mother in, glancing at Lisa reprovingly.

"Lisa!" Catherine cried, as the doors began to close.

Lisa pushed forward, straining against the suddenly thickened air that prevented her from moving. She watched in horror as the elevator door closed and her mother was lost to her forever.

CHAPTER 14

ARMAND RODE SWIFTLY THROUGH THE FOREST AS DAWN broke over the high country, glancing frequently over his shoulder to ascertain that he wasn't being followed. Renaud had been far too curious about his urge to go for a solitary ride beyond the walls, but Armand had told him he needed to meditate, that his faith was often renewed by the breaking day and he found his prayers more easily recited in God's natural splendor.

Armand had rolled his eyes and cursed. God's natural temple was not, nor would ever be, enough for him. Certainly not now, living in the abject poverty and humiliation he'd endured since the overthrow of their Order. He longed for a fine roof over his head, luxurious surroundings, wealth, and respect. He'd lost all of those things when they'd been driven out of France, ousted by King Philippe the Fair, who had desired the Templars' wealth.

Many had coveted that wealth, and feared the Templars' growing power, but only Philippe had been clever and avaricious enough—and had been owed enough political favors—to bring the mighty Order crashing to its knees. Being forced to his knees was not a position Armand could accept. His life had been precisely as he'd wanted it, and each day he'd come closer to the true secrets of the Order, becoming more trusted and taken into greater confidences. As Commander of Knights, he'd nearly been able to taste the privilege and power of the enticing inner circle he'd been laboring to penetrate. Then the false arrests had been made and the knights had been driven from their homeland. Only a barbaric, excommunicated king had been willing to grant them clemency. When the Order of Templars had been dissolved by papal decree in 1307, no order of suppression was issued in Scotland; and under Robert the Bruce, the Templars had sought haven and become the *Militi Templi Scotia*.

Ha, he thought morosely, more like the *Minutiae Puppets Scotia*, for they danced to a new king's tune now, a king who, while he did not seek to take from them, had no wealth to confer upon them, no respect and no lands. They were fugitives, hunted and reviled.

But Armand Berard would not be so for long. The recent years of running and hiding, of pretending to keep the faith when the Order was so utterly destroyed,

had firmed his resolve. His brother knights might cling to the absurd hope that they would be able to rebuild their Order in Scotland and eventually regain their prominence, but Armand knew better. The shining hour of the Knights Templar had passed.

He pitied his pious brothers, who believed that power was never to be used for personal gain. For what other reason would one ever use it?

He cursed and spat furiously. He'd been so close—so near the forbidden knowledge of the Templars' true power.

Armand reined in his mount, ducking under a low-hanging limb and slowing to a trot as he entered the clearing. He nodded a greeting to the cloaked rider awaiting him there.

"What have you for us, Berard?"

Armand smiled. It had been impossible to get word to his co-conspirator, James Comyn, while stationed at Dunnottar, but he hadn't had anything to tell him at the time. In the past week, however, he had come upon powerful information and knew it was a portent of good things to come. Armand Berard would sell his services for wealth and titles in England, and set about making up for lost time with wine, women, and weaving his way into the inner circles of Edward's court, by whatever means were necessary. He was a muscular, attractive man, and word was that Edward had a special fondness for personal services from well-favored men. Armand smiled, pondering how he would bend the English king to his will.

"Have you been able to find out any more about Brodie?" the Comyn pressed impatiently.

Armand regarded the thin, sadistic face of his companion. Grizzled white brows arched over pale blue eyes that were far colder than the iciest loch. "Little. He is a private man and those closest to him do not speak of him freely." Armand tightened his hold on the reins, soothing his mount to a standstill.

"Edward is advocating laying siege to his castle. He wants the hallows, Berard, and he grows impatient. Have you been able to confirm they are there?"

"As yet it is still rumor. But now that I am finally in his keep, I will be able to search thoroughly. That's what Edward wanted, wasn't it—a spy within his

walls? Bid him be content that someone has finally managed to penetrate Brodie, and grant me time to search. It would be better that I find the spear and the sword than you storm his walls and try to take them," Armand warned.

Find them he would, and then sell them to the highest bidder. The four hallows had been under the protection of the Templars until the Order fell. If he could now lay his hands on the Spear that Roars for Blood—the lance that had allegedly wounded Christ's side—there would be no limit to the wealth and power he might obtain. If he also found the Sword of Light, rumored to blaze with holy fire when wielded, his future would be assured. Allegedly, the cauldron and the Stone of Destiny were also somewhere in Brodie's keep. Now that he was being housed in the middle of that keep, Armand would not fail to exploit the opportunity.

To dissuade Edward's men from attacking Castle Brodie before he located the hallows, he warned, "Brodie has fifty Templars in residence, in addition to his troops, and if he indeed possesses the sacred objects, he possesses the ability to crush you before you so much as breach his gate."

The Comyn shifted irritably. "We know that. It has thus far restrained Edward's hand."

"Besides," Armand added thoughtfully, "I wonder if he truly has them. If he did, one would think he would have turned them to Scotland's aid long ago."

"Perhaps he is as self-serving as you and keeps them for the power they give him. Or perhaps he is devout, and believes they may only be used for God's will."

"It scarce matters, for I now have the means to lure him forth," Armand replied.

The Comyn straightened abruptly and snapped his fingers. "Information. Now."

"It will cost you," Armand said coldly. "Dearly."

"Edward will pay dearly if you deliver Castle Brodie and its notorious master to us. I assume you have a price in mind?"

"No less than my weight *in* purest gold."

"And what do you offer us for such an extravagance?"

"Circenn recently became betrothed, to one Lisa MacRobertson, who happens to be Robert the Brace's cousin by blood," Armand said. "I will deliver her into your hands. How you destroy Brodie from there is your doing."

James Comyn's excitement was palpable, and it translated to his mount, who nickered and paced in skittish circles. Calming him with a thin white hand, Comyn kneed the horse close to Armand's. "Is she fair?" he demanded, his eyes glittering.

"Extraordinarily," Armand assured him, knowing the woman would beg for death at this man's hands, long before it was granted. "She is well curved and lush. A fiery woman, too proud for her own good."

The Comyn rubbed his hands. "Once we have her, Brodie will follow. Edward will delight in caging and quartering another of the Brace's kin."

"I will bring her to you for the gold *and* a title and lands in England."

"Greedy, are we not?" James mocked.

"If I bring the sword and spear, I may ask for the crown," Armand said, with a chilly smile.

"For the sword and the spear, I might try to help you get it," his companion purred.

Armand raised his hand in a mock salute. "To England."

The Comyn smiled. "To England."

Armand rode back to Castle Brodie well pleased. He need only entice the woman outside the walls of the castle, and his new life would begin.

* * *

Lisa sighed as she rummaged through the chest. Four days had passed since they'd arrived at Castle Brodie, and her quest to find the flask had not been successful. She was beginning to despair. The man could have a thousand hiding places in a castle so large. For all she knew, he might have buried it in the dungeon—which was one place she wasn't in a hurry to see. She now understood

the expression "looking for a needle in a haystack." Castle Brodie had two floors, with dozens of other floors in the turrets and towers that popped up at unexpected intervals, and the wings circled around not one but four enclosed courtyards. Quite simply, the castle was so large it could take her a year to search every room thoroughly. She'd tried to think like Circenn, to put herself inside his mind, but that had proved impossible; the man was an enigma to her.

He'd carefully avoided her since their arrival and had meals sent up to her room. She had seen him stomping about the outer bailey with his men. Once, he'd glanced up as she'd watched him through a window, as if he'd felt her gaze. The smile he'd given her had bared teeth and not much more. His eyes had been distant, troubled. Defiantly, she'd blown him a kiss to agitate him. It had worked. He'd pivoted in a whirl of cloak and stalked away.

Lisa rubbed her temples and returned her attention to the chest she'd been digging through. She was better off not thinking about him.

"Here ye be, lassie. I was wondering where ye'd gotten off to in this drafty old castle."

Lisa abruptly stopped poking through the chest and turned around. Her eyes felt gritty and heavy; she'd woken to a pillow wet from tears again this morning. She dimly recalled her dream—she'd been having horrible ones for days now, and she felt braised from them. But her nightmares had galvanized her into action. She *had* to find the flask.

Her hands fell to her sides. Eirren stood a few paces away, leaning against a chair and watching her, his eyes bright with amusement.

"Have ye found what yer searching for?" he asked.

"I wasn't searching for anything," Lisa lied hastily. "I was merely admiring the room and wondering what treasures this chest might hold. I can't help myself, I'm a curious girl," she added breezily.

"Me mam used to tell me curiosity was one of the eight deadly sins."

"There are only seven sins," Lisa said defensively, "and curiosity can be a good thing. It encourages one to learn."

"Me, I've ne'er wanted to learn much of anything," Eirren said with a shrug. "Doin' is much more fun than learnin'."

"Spoken like a true male," Lisa said dryly. "You are in dire need of a mam. Speaking of which, you and I have a date with warm water and soap later this afternoon."

Eirren laughed and tossed himself into the chair. His thin legs protruded from beneath his dirty plaid and he dangled them over the side, bare feet swinging. "It's not a bad castle, is it, lassie? Have ye seen the buttery? The laird stocks a fine larder and hosts a grander feast—that is, when he's not planning wars and battling. There havna been many feasts in this castle for years now. Sad," he added dejectedly. "A lad could starve for want of spiced plums and sugared hams."

Lisa had a feeling that Eirren didn't want for much of anything his clever little mind could deduce a method to obtain. "How did you get to Castle Brodie, Eirren? I don't recall seeing you with the men when we were riding from Dunnottar."

"Me and me da dinna leave till later that night. We doona travel with the troops. Me da is of the serving folk; it doesna sit well to mix with warriors."

"Who is your da?" she asked.

"No one ye would ken," he replied, leaping from the chair. "I hear the laird told his men ye were cousin to the Bruce," Eirren said, changing the subject swiftly. "Is that the way of things?"

"No," Lisa said, wondering why she trusted him enough to share confidences. Possibly because she had no one else to trust, and if she couldn't trust a child, whom could she trust? "I told you I'm not from this time."

"Did the fae folk muck about wi' ye?"

"What?" Lisa asked blankly.

"The fairies—you ken we have 'em in Scotland. Oft they are wily little folk, mussing about with time and whatnot better left alone."

"Actually, it was the laird himself who's responsible for my being here. He cursed something and it brought me to him when I touched it."

Eirren shook his head disparagingly. "That man has ne'er cursed a thing well. Ye'd think he'd stop trying."

"He's cursed things before?" Lisa asked.

Eirren shook his head. "Doona be asking me, lassie. Ask him these questions. I only ken the few things I hear, and it's not always the truth of the matter. I hear tell yer handfasted to the laird."

"I'm not really. What does that mean anyway?"

"Means yer as good as wed, and if within a year an' a day yer carrying his bairn,'tis a weddin' without a weddin' being needed. Are ye carryin' his bairn?"

"No!" Lisa was certain she looked as appalled as she felt. Then she briefly considered what a child of his would be like, and how she would have to go about getting one. She drop-kicked the intriguing thought from her mind.

Eirren smiled gamely. "Ye can forgive curiosity, canna ye? Yer guilty of it as well. Would ye like to explore? I can give ye a wee tour before me da is needing me."

"Thank you, Eirren, but I'm happy here." She had to get back to her search and needed privacy to do it. "I thought I'd look through some of these manuscripts and pass the rainy afternoon in the... er... study." What did one call a room like this? It was a medieval version of a modern den. A circular piece of wood served as a desk, for lack of a better word. It looked as if it had been hewn from a massive tree trunk and was nearly five feet in diameter. Centered before the hearth, it had smoothly rounded drawers that had surely been a woodcarver's nightmare to create.

On either side of the hearth were recessed bookcases in which manuscripts bound in leather and rolled scrolls were neatly arranged on the shelves. Carved chairs with pillowed arms and cushions—someone in the keep was a clever seamstress—were strewn in cozy arrangements. Colorful tapestries adorned the walls, and the floor was dotted with woven rugs. It was obviously the room where Circenn tallied accounts, went through correspondence, and drew up maps

and battle plans. The east wall was lined with tall windows, paned with a greenish glazed glass through which the green lawn was visible. Circenn Brodie was wealthy, that was a certainty, for in some of the rooms in the castle she'd seen clear windows.

"Suit yerself, lassie. I'll be seeing ye before anon, I'm fair certain." Eirren flashed her a grin and left as quickly and silently as he'd arrived.

"Wait—Eirren!" she called after him, hoping to set a time to meet with him later. The lad needed a bath, and she had a dozen questions to ask. She suspected his cheerful demeanor was much as hers—a facade shielding a lonely heart—and she believed he would welcome her mothering once he grew accustomed to it.

She would track him down in a few hours, she decided, but for now it was back to the business at hand: Where would Circenn hide the flask? She had no doubt he'd secreted it away as soon as they'd arrived. She had tried to watch what he did with his pack when they'd entered the castle, and had last seen it lying beside the door, but it had been gone the next morning when she'd sneaked down to begin her search. Whatever was in the silvery container must be extraordinarily valuable for him to be so careful with it. Was it indeed a potion to manipulate time? Was he blatantly lying to her about whether he could return her? She might consider drinking whatever it contained once she found it; perhaps the contents were magic.

She rummaged through the chest, sorting past ledgers. A few lumpy cushions, throws, and balls of thick thread had been casually tossed in with the mix. Nearing the bottom, she uncovered a sheaf of papers filled with slanted scrawl. The words looked angry, as had the words carved on top of the chest in the museum.

"Have you found what you seek, Lisa?" Circenn Brodie asked quietly.

Lisa dropped the papers back into the chest, closed her eyes, and sighed. With a gazillion rooms in this castle, everyone seemed hell-bent on joining her in this one. "I was getting a blanket out of the chest"—she snatched up a plaid that had been folded near the top—"when one of my earring backs came off," she lied splendidly.

"You are not wearing ear rings, lass," he said, breaking it into two distinct words,

eyeing her ears. "On either ear," he said impassively.

Lisa clutched at her ears, then nearly assaulted the chest in a frenzied search. "Oh heavens, they *both* fell off," she cried. "Can you believe that?"

She flinched when his strong hands settled upon her waist as she bent over the chest. "No," he said quietly. "I cannot. Why doona you simply tell me what you are looking for, lass? Perhaps I can help you. I know the castle well. It is mine, after all."

Lisa straightened slowly; she hadn't fooled him for a moment. She was excruciatingly aware of his presence behind her, could feel the brush of his chest against her back. His hands were hot through the fabric of her gown. She glanced down, and the sight of his elegant fingers curving around her waist quickened her breath. "You don't need to touch me to talk to me," she said softly. She wasn't in full command of her mental faculties when Circenn touched her, and she needed every ounce of her wits to deal with him.

He removed his hands, and she exhaled a sigh of relief that served also to calm her erratic heartbeat, but then he gripped her by the shoulders and turned her about to face him. She tilted back her head to look at him. He regarded her in silence until she was too nervous to hold her tongue any longer.

"I was merely snooping. I'm curious about this place. It's my history—

"Had you been strolling about the castle studying portraits, examining the weapons, or looking at furniture, you might have convinced me, but rummaging through my chest strikes me as somewhat odd. My servants tell me they've seen you in every wing of my castle."

Lisa swallowed, daunted by the cool expression on his face. A muscle jumped in his jaw and she realized she had upset him more than he was letting on. *Danger*, her mind cautioned. *This man is a warrior, Lisa.*

"Were you looking for battle plans, lass?" he asked tightly.

"No!" she assured him hastily. "I'm not interested *in* that."

Circenn stepped past her, bent over the chest, and poked through it. Apparently he found little to warrant concern, but he removed the sheaf of papers she'd

discovered, folded them, and placed them in his sporran. He pivoted behind her and angled his body so that his chest brushed her shoulder.

She could smell him—that faint spicy scent that lured, befuddled, and seduced her. He was much too close for comfort. Lisa stolidly refused to budge an inch; she would not turn to meet his gaze again. *Let him talk to my cheek*, she thought defiantly. She was not going to let him use his body to intimidate her, although she had no doubt he'd used it effectively to that purpose for most of his life.

His breath fanning her ear, he said, "I came to tell you Duncan awaits you in the oriel—that is the room above the Greathall. He will give you a tour and has more to teach you before you mingle with my people. I expect you for dinner this evening—"

"We've not dined together before. I see no reason to start now," she interrupted hastily.

He continued as if she'd not spoken. "And I've had some gowns sent to your room. I suggest you spend the early evening with Gillendria, who will arrange for a bath and dress your hair—"

"I don't need to fuss," she protested quickly, her eyes fixed on the wall.

"My future wife would fuss with her appearance to befit her station."

Circenn dropped his hand from where it was suspended above her nape and clenched it so he wouldn't give in to the temptation to caress her hair, perhaps place a finger beneath her chin, and turn her face to his. Over the past few days, knowing she lay in his bed, slept in his castle, he'd grown deeply intrigued with the thought of being handfasted to her. His desire for her had in no way responded to his efforts at discipline; rather, it seemed to be growing defiantly, in inverse proportion to his attempts to contain it. Handfasting seemed to be acquiring the elements of a nicely bent rule, to the new and decidedly not improved Circenn Brodie.

If she turned to look at him, she would clearly see his hunger for her, and he *wanted* her to see it; it was like a volcano inside him—hot, far from dormant, and bordering on dangerous. He wanted to see how she would react, if her eyes would widen, her pupils dilate, her lips part. He gazed at her for a moment,

willing her to turn and face him, but she was stalwart in her stance.

* * *

Circenn entered his chambers, gliding soundlessly across the floor. He drew a deep breath and let himself feel the raw power surging in his veins. *Why fight it now?* he thought sardonically. The past four days had been hellish. Since they'd returned to his castle, he'd tried to keep himself busy training, attempting to exhaust himself physically so he might sleep at night, but to no avail. At every moment he was exquisitely conscious of the woman in his keep.

And exquisitely tempted.

He'd broken every damned rule on his list but two, and now he'd come to this chamber to bend yet another one. He'd come to scry his future.

He paused before the brightly burning fire. Perhaps, if he had peered into his future the moment she had appeared, he might have glimpsed the disasters coming and been able to avert them. Perhaps he should have broken that rule first. Or perhaps he should have practiced scrying years ago and foreseen her arrival, but he hadn't for two reasons: He disliked using magic, and scrying was not an exact art. Sometimes he could see clearly, and at other times his visions were impossible to decipher, more confusing than helpful.

Circenn stared into the flames for a long moment, arguing with himself over such things as fate and free choice. He'd never been able to reach a solid conclusion about predestination. When Adam had first shown him the art of scrying his future days, Circenn had scoffed, arguing that to believe one could see one's future meant that it was unchangeable, which annihilated the concept of personal control, something he couldn't accept. Adam had merely laughed and goaded Circenn that if he refused to learn all the arts, he couldn't expect to understand the few he did know. *A bird's eye views the entire terrain over which it flies, a mouse sees only dirt. Be ye free or be ye mouse?* Adam had asked, his mouth curved in that perpetually mocking smile.

Sighing, Circenn knelt by the fireplace and ran his hand beneath the crack where the hearth met the floor. A portion of the wall containing the hearth silently revolved ninety degrees, revealing a pitch-black chamber behind it. He picked up a candle and stepped into the hidden chamber. With a slight movement of his foot, he depressed the lever that spun the wall closed. It took a few moments for

his eyes to adjust to the room with no windows. It was an uncomfortable place for him, a place he sought only in his darkest hours.

He passed the small tables, toying idly with the various "gifts" the blackest elf had brought him. Some he understood, some he never wanted to understand. Adam had given them strange names: batteries, automatic rifles, lighters, tampons. Circenn had explored a few of them, and one he'd found himself drawn to many times over the centuries. Adam called it a "portable CD player." His usual favorite was Mozart's *Requiem*, but today, however, he was more in the mood for a piece called *Ride of the Valkyries* by Richard Wagner. Slipping the device over his ears, he thumbed the gauge to full volume and sank into a chair in the corner, staring at the candle flame. Papers crackled in his sporran and he removed them with a wry smile. He'd long ago forgotten stuffing those sheaves in the chest in his study, but he had narrowly escaped a disastrous situation by retrieving them. The last thing she needed to stumble upon was his scribbled and maudlin introspections. She would truly think him deranged.

He knew the first sheaf by heart:

~4 Dec. 858~

I have lived forty-one years, and today I have discovered that I will live forever, courtesy of Adam Black. I can scarcely dip my quill in ink; my hand trembles with rage. He gave me no choice—but what matter the wishes of mere mortals to an immortal race that has lost the ability to feel?

He didn't tell me until after my wedding today, and even then he would not tell me all, he merely acknowledged that he had slipped the potion in my wine sometime in the past ten years. Now I shall watch my wife grow old and lose her to death, while I continue on, solitary. Shall I become a monster like Adam? Will time dim my ability to feel? Will a thousand years make me weary beyond enduring and tinge my mind with that puckish madness that delights in mischievous manipulation? Will two thousand years make me become like them—enamored of mortal struggles they can no longer feel? 'Tis no curse I would wish upon my love; better she should live and die as nature intended.

Ah... was it only this summer past I dreamed of my children, playing around the reflecting pool? Now I pause and think—what, give the fool more fodder? What atrocities might he commit upon my sons and daughters? Och, Naya, forgive me,

love. You shall find me seedless as the grape in wine.

And the second, the one that had laid the course of his life:

~31 Dec. 858~

My mind is consumed with this immortality. I have pondered naught but these questions during the waxing and waning of the moon, and now on this eve before the new year dawns—the first of forevermore—I have at long last achieved resolution. I will not permit the immortal madness to take me, and I shall conquer it thus: I have devised a set of rules.

I, Circenn Brodie, Laird and Thane of Brodie, do vow to adhere faithfully to these tenets, never to break them, for if I should, I may tumble headlong into Adam's destructive irreverence and become a creature who holds nothing sacred.

I shall not lie.

I shall not spill innocent blood.

I shall not break an oath sworn.

I shall not use magic for personal gain or glory.

I shall never betray my honor.

And the third, when brutal understanding had finally dawned and he'd tasted the bitter dregs hidden in the cup of immortal life, camouflaged by the sweet nectar of perfect health and longevity:

~1, April 947~

I buried my foster son Jamie today, knowing it was only one of an eternal succession of burials. The hour grows late and my mind turns, as it oft is wont, to Naya. It has been a score of years since I lay with a woman. Dare I love again? How many people will I lower into their graves, and is it with such grim doings that madness begins? Ah, fie. 'Tis a lonely life.

A lonely life, indeed.

The savage music thundering in his ears, he gazed deep into the flame and

deliberately opened that part of his mind he usually kept tightly shut. Unlike Druidism, which was a ritualistic art that included binding curses and spells, true magic required neither ceremonies nor rhymes. Adam's kind of magic was a process of opening one's mind and using a focus for the power once summoned. Circenn had found that the glassy surface of the reflecting pool in the rear gardens, or a polished metal disk, was often the best focus.

He retreated into his mind, staring intently at the shield propped against the wall. He'd fashioned it himself hundreds of years past, and although it was far too battered to carry into battle, it served him well as a focal point. The last time he'd tried to scry his life, he'd been trying to see himself five hundred years in the future, to determine what he might become. The vision that had flickered within this same shield had been bitter indeed. His vision had told him that by the seventeenth century, he would be possessed by a depraved madness.

Fate? Predestination?

His visions had told him truly when and how Naya would die; still, he'd been unable to save her. Natural causes, old age—a thing against which he possessed no weapon. Impotent in all his power, he'd lost her. And she'd raged against him as she'd died, cursing him a demon, for his hair had never grayed, his face had never lined.

He shook off the memory and intensified his focus. Images blurred and slowly coalesced. At first he could define only blobs of color: pink, bronze, dusky rose, and a backdrop of ivory. He narrowed the span of control, focusing on what the next few months would bring him.

When the pictures became clear, his hands closed like claws upon the arms of his chair.

He stared, first in shock, then with fascination, and finally with acquiescence, a faint smile playing about his lips.

Who was he to argue with fate? If that was what his time held, who was he to be so arrogant to think he could change it? He had sworn this would not happen, yet all events had consistently carved the path to it, from the first day she'd arrived.

He would be the worst kind of liar if he tried to convince himself that he'd hoped

to see anything different.

He sucked in a shallow breath as he watched the nude woman reflected in the shield roll astride his naked body. His abdomen tightened and his cock hardened painfully as she straddled him and lowered her hot, wet sheath onto him inch by inch. In the shield, he had a clear view of her, as if he were lying on his back, looking up at her as she rode him. Her full breasts bobbed tantalizingly above him, her nipples tight. His hands swept up to palm them roughly, to tease the puckered crests. She arched her back, tossing her head and baring the column of her neck. The muscles in her neck were taut with passion as she strained for her pleasure, and it aroused him immeasurably. His hot gaze swept down over her breasts, followed the hollows and planes of her stomach, to the soft curls between her thighs, and he stared, fascinated, as she impaled herself upon his shaft, watched as the thick column of his cock was revealed, then buried again in her mound. She had a tiny dark mole on the inside of her left thigh, and in his vision, his fingers splayed over it. He ached to kiss it, to run his tongue over it.

He could nearly feel her body clench around him: tight, hot, and slick with that woman's wetness that made a man feel invincible—the measure of which bespoke his prowess: the wetter the woman, the more desired the man.

When the shield finally went dark, he came to himself with his hand on his cock. It was swollen and aching for release.

"So, that is what is to be," he mused aloud. "Fate."

He couldn't deny that he'd wanted it since the day he first saw her; he'd had to forcibly restrain himself from taking her on several occasions. The vision had just confirmed that he would indeed have her, and that she would indeed be willing.

Why do you fight it? Adam had asked him angrily on more than one occasion. *Why can you not glory in what you are and enjoy the power of being Circenn Brodie? You possess the ability to give and take more pleasure than most mortals ever know. Soar, Circenn. Drink of the life of my kind. I offer you it, freely.*

Not freely, Circenn scoffed. *There was a price.* He squeezed his eyes shut as the music thundered in his ears.

It was his fate that she would ride like a mighty, demanding Valkyrie upon his body.

She already sang like a siren to his heart, this woman of defiance and fear, of curiosity and contradiction. Naya had been soft and passive toward her lot in life, until the end when she'd turned bitter. Never before had he met a woman like Lisa, a woman with needs and desires and a mind of her own. Deep emotions roiled in her breast, cunning intelligence glowed in her eyes, and a fierceness that vied with the legendary Valkyries' breathed in her veins.

Rules be damned. How could he argue with the future? It was written. He could only take it, enjoy it, and make the most of it, praying he would survive it when he lost his heart to her, then inevitably lost her in a short span of years. If he was going to be mad in the future, he may as well savor the present.

Circenn Brodie rose from his chair, ripped the machine from the future off his head, and did what he'd never dared do before:

He eased his control a tiny bit and encouraged the magic to throb inside him.

Dark angel, Adam had inveigled him, *soar into my world and fear nothing*.

He tossed back his head and tasted the power running through his formidable body.

It was a very different creature who left the dark, hidden room to find his woman.

* * *

Adam Black smiled as he removed the tampon from the barrel of the rifle. Although Circenn had refused to use any of the weapons Adam had brought him, the warrior within him could not permit time to tarnish them. He snorted, dangling the tampon from its string. Only his fastidious Circenn Brodie would decide that the soft white swabs were to be used for cleaning.

Eyeing the rifle, Adam grinned. They *were* the perfect size to slip inside the barrel—it nearly seemed sensible. But he hadn't brought tampons back to medieval Scotland for Circenn to play with; he'd brought them—and every gift he'd chosen—for another reason. Although if he had his way, there would be many nine-month intervals during which she would have no use for them.

CHAPTER 15

"YER A BEAUTY, LASS," GILLENDRIA SAID, CLAPPING her hands. "I thought I could refashion it well, but'tis the woman who makes this gown."

Lisa stood before the mirror, gazing at herself with no small measure of shock.

Gillendria had refitted a dress that she said had belonged to Circenn's mother, Morganna. Now she slipped it over her shoulders, atop a shift of softest linen. Midnight-blue silk clung to her breasts, and the scooped neck slipped off her shoulders, accentuating her translucent skin and fine collarbones. It hugged her hips and fell to the floor in a rustle of blue embroidered with gold. At her waist, Gillendria had fastened a gold girdle that knotted low and from which hundreds of tiny gold moons and stars dangled. Matching slippers encased her feet, and a lovely gold torque that predated medieval times encircled her throat. An embroidered surcoat was tied below her breasts. Gillendria had curled her hair, carefully picking out the gold highlights and curling them a bit tighter so that they lay atop the wavy mass, then mussed it gently. A dab of some combination of root, herb, and flower colored her lips ruby.

Who was this woman in the mirror who looked like sin? she wondered. *Like Sin's*, she amended fancifully, for even she had to admit that the woman in the mirror now looked a suitable companion for the laird of the castle. For once she didn't curse herself for being tall, because in this gown her height added an unmistakable touch of elegance.

"You're incredible, Gillendria," Lisa breathed.

"I am, aren't I?" Gillendria replied without a trace of arrogance. "Although I have not had a woman with yer perfect figure to clothe for some time, I have not forgotten how. The laird will be well pleased."

Lisa was well pleased. She'd never known she could look like this. At seventeen, she'd hoped one day to look like Catherine—a golden, striking beauty—but work had become all-consuming as she'd struggled to provide for her mother, and Lisa hadn't spared another thought for her own appearance in five long years. Her mother would love—*Oh! Mom!*

She shivered. How could she have forgotten even for an instant?

"Are ye cold, milady?" Gillendria asked. "I can fetch a wrap."

"Nay," Lisa said softly. "Just a momentary chill, nothing more. Go on with you now, Gillendria. I'll find my way to the Greathall."

After Gillendria left, Lisa sank down on the bed. Castle Brodie was the loveliest place she'd ever been, and there she sat in a dress made for a princess, about to have dinner with a man who was the stuff of her every romantic dream. For a few minutes she'd forgotten all about Catherine. She'd been too busy experiencing all the anticipation and excitement of a woman preparing for a special date.

But this was no date, and there would be no happily ever after. Her mother needed her desperately, and Lisa was doing something she had never before permitted herself to do: She was failing to carry out her responsibilities to Catherine. Failure was not a thing to which she was accustomed. She'd always been able to work harder, or for longer hours, to ensure, if not success, at least safety, food, and a roof over their heads. She had no right to feel even a brief moment of happiness, she admonished herself, until she found the flask and established her way home.

And then will you feel happy, Lisa? her heart asked gently. *When you leave him and go home to sit at your mother's bedside? When she's gone and you are left alone in the twenty-first century? Will you be happy then?*

* * *

Her resolve to feel no pleasure lasted all of an hour. Lisa finished her dessert and sighed contentedly. If she'd learned nothing else, she'd learned to appreciate the good things that were interspersed with the bad, and dinner had been the best. The formal dining hall was beautiful, lit by dozens of candles. She was warm, clean, and full. For the first time since she'd been in the fourteenth century she'd eaten a splendid meal. Admittedly, her meals back in her century had never been seven courses of heaven, but even White Castle hamburgers fared well against the bland, tough meat and hard bread to which she'd been subjected. During the past few weeks, she'd despaired of ever eating a decent meal again.

Twenty feet of table separated them—like in the old movies, she thought. She

needed twenty feet between her and the lord of Brodie Castle. They'd dined mostly in silence, and he'd been the epitome of a gracious host. He hadn't scowled at her even once. In fact, several times she'd caught him regarding her with an admiring gaze. His previous bad temper seemed to have melted away without a trace, and he appeared as close to relaxed as she'd ever seen him. She wondered what had changed his mood; perhaps he was going to war soon, she decided, which would suit them both fine. He'd get to throw his weight around being the brash overbearing male, and she'd be free to tear the castle apart from top to bottom in search of the flask, without fear of his watchful gaze. He certainly wouldn't carry such a valuable relic into battle. He'd have to leave it here somewhere. The idea made her feel positively magnanimous.

She glanced at him, feeling secure in the distance between them, and smiled. "Thank you," she murmured.

"For what, lass?" He idly licked a swirl of fluffy topping from his spoon.

"For feeding me," she replied, assuring herself that the mere glimpse of his tongue flicking over a spoon was not sufficient cause for her blood pressure to rise.

"I've fed you every day since you've been here and you've not thanked me before," he observed mockingly.

"That's because you never fed me anything worth eating before." She watched as he licked a dab of cream from the tip of his spoon. "I think you got it all," she said uneasily. Suddenly the cavernous room seemed to shrink and she felt as if she were sitting mere inches away from him, not twenty feet. And who had poked up the dratted fire? She fanned at her face with a hand that betrayed not the slightest tremor she was feeling.

"Got what all?" he asked absently, filling his spoon with a mound of berries and cream.

"How is this topping made?" she asked, changing the subject swiftly.

"Much like butter. You churn it with paddles or shake it in a jug. It is merely cream skimmed from the top of milk, mixed with sugar and a touch of cinnamon. It thickens as you paddle it and add the sweetening. I used to watch

them make it when I was a lad, flattering cook and anyone else in the kitchen to get my hands on it."

Whipped cream in the fourteenth century, she marveled. She wondered how many things these "barbarians" had that modern scholars never discussed. But why wouldn't they have such condiments? In the few days she'd been in Castle Brodie, she'd noted many things that surprised her. It all just seemed too civilized.

She fixed her gaze on her plate trying to prevent herself from rising from her chair, taking his spoon away, and giving him something else to lick. Her finger. Her lower lip. The hollow of her spine.

Although she'd had little experience with men, she was innately sensual and she'd fantasized often. Perhaps more than most, because she'd tasted so little of sexuality. Tonight, with this magnificent warrior dining regally at the end of the table, her imagination took flight.

In her fantasy he walked to her end of the table, capturing and holding her gaze with that subtle magnetism he had. His eyes were heavy lidded, banking a challenge: *Become a woman, Lisa?* He took her hand, pulled her to her feet, and kissed her, a soft brush of his lips, a quick velvety stroke of his tongue, promising so much more, slipping deep into her mouth when her lips parted on a sigh. Her fantasy picked up speed, fast-forwarded abruptly to his pressing her back onto the table, slipping the gown from her body, dropping whipped cream on her breasts, and licking it from her moist, warm skin with the same careful deliberation he'd given his spoon. Perhaps a dab of warm, rich cream would inadvertently fall where she'd touched herself before, and with his lips he would...

Swallowing hard, she looked at him.

He raised his eyes from the frothy concoction on his spoon at the precise moment she looked up, and their gazes locked over the length of the polished wood table. *Where would you drip whipped cream on him, Lisa?* The answer came with frightening swiftness and conviction: *Everywhere*. She wanted to explore his body, the hard ripples, the smooth skin. The candlelight bathed his olive skin with a golden hue, and his dark good looks were set off perfectly by his linen shirt and the splash of black and crimson draped across his chest. He

was mesmerizing.

"Are you hungry, lass?" He licked his spoon languidly.

She couldn't tear her gaze away. "No. I've eaten quite enough," she managed.

"You seem to be watching my dessert most intently. Are you certain there isn't something else you wish to sate your appetite?"

Besides you to remove your clothing, lie on the table, and let me finger paint you with whipped cream, you mean? "Nope," she said casually. "Not a thing." She watched him for a moment; he still had a great deal of dessert left. How was she going to get through this? "Actually," she said, leaping to her feet, "I'm exhausted and would like to retire."

He dropped his spoon and moved swiftly to her side. "I will escort you to your chambers," he murmured, taking her arm and tucking it into his. Lisa shivered. The man was throwing *off* the heat of a small forge. His scent enveloped her, faint but spicy. It was a fragrance she couldn't quite put her finger on. She was certain she'd smelled it before but couldn't figure out where. It was definitely a unique scent, one that modern-day perfumers would have killed to get their hands on.

"I can walk by myself perfectly well," she said, removing her arm from his.

"As you wish, Lisa," he replied easily.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you suddenly being so nice to me? I thought you were angry with me. I thought you didn't want to marry me. I thought you thought I was a spy."

He shrugged innocently "First, I've always been reasonably pleasant to you. Second, I doona have any choice but to marry you, and third, marrying you renders distrusting you obsolete. I am a logical man, lass. When a warrior realizes he has only one course of action, he makes the best of it. Anything else would be foolish. That doesn't mean that I doona still have many questions. I plan to learn everything about you, lass," he said meaningfully. "But I am no longer going to fight my situation." *Not one bit of it*, he added silently. *Not my magic, not my dark side, not my adherence to rules. I am a new man, Lisa Stone*, he told her inside his head. And it felt good. Never before had he accepted any

portion of what he considered his dark side, but never before had he been so tempted by a woman to do so. He had a feeling that a man might need a little magic to woo and win Lisa Stone.

They ascended the stairs in silence. He smiled, thinking he'd finally managed to still her acerbic tongue merely by being as nice to her as he'd wanted to be, but, constrained by his oath and his rules, had resisted. She would encounter no further resistance from him.

At the door to her chambers, she stopped and looked up at him. He was pleased by her action, for it told him clearly that she desired his kiss.

And he planned to give her much more than a kiss before the night was through.

CHAPTER 16

LISA WAITED, CURSING HERSELF SILENTLY. DURING THE walk to her chambers she'd thought of a dozen excuses to escape him and flee to her room alone, but one thing had prevented her: She wanted a good-night kiss. Dinner had been perfect, and she wanted to end it like a real date. With a real kiss.

So she faced him and turned her face up expectantly.

But he neither kissed her nor left her there. Rather, he reached around her to the door, pushed it open, and smoothly backed her into the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked uneasily.

"I thought merely to visit with you awhile, lass."

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "You may bid me good night now." Her fantasy was too fresh in her mind. She wanted a simple kiss to dream on, not the whole man. She couldn't handle the entire man.

"Why? Do I make you uncomfortable, lass?" He stepped farther into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Of course not," she lied, moving away from him quickly. "Infuriate me? Frequently." She suddenly realized she was pacing and forced her feet to still. "I just don't see any reason for you to be in my chambers. Go." She waved her hand at him.

He laughed, a husky rumble. "I think you find being in a room with me and a bed disturbing."

Lisa moved swiftly to the plump mattresses and plunked herself upon them defiantly. "No, I don't. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. It's simply that I'm tired and would like to sleep." She yawned hugely.

"Quite a yawn. Lovely pink tongue, by the way. Do you recall how it feels when yours jousts with mine? I haven't forgotten. I want more."

Despite her resolve not to, she looked at him, fascinated.

"I want your tongue in my mouth."

She averted her gaze with effort.

"I want mine all over your body."

Lisa swallowed. "I am not interested," she said faintly.

"Doona lie to yourself, Lisa. Doona lie to me. You want me. I can feel it in the air between us. I can smell it."

Lisa didn't dare breathe. She harbored an absurd hope that he would just leave after declaring that truth and not force her to confront the enormity of it. She *did* want him. Desperately. Fantasies collided in her mind, daring her to relinquish her innocence and embrace womanhood.

He moved slowly toward her and sat on the edge of her bed. She scooted back hastily, her back flush to the headboard, and hugged a pillow to her chest.

"You enjoy looking at me, doona you, Lisa?"

She enjoyed doing more than looking at him. She liked fighting him with her kisses. Tasting the salt and honey of his skin.

With deft fingers, he untied the laces of his linen shirt and shrugged it off over his head. The muscles in his abdomen rippled, the curves of his biceps flexed. "Then look," he said, his voice rough. "Look your fill. Think you I doona recall how you gazed at me in my bath?" When his wide shoulders were revealed, she shook her head and sucked in a breath.

"St-stop that! What are you doing?" Lisa exclaimed. Lounging at the foot of her bed was six feet seven inches of dark, seductive man, with rippling muscles beneath bronzed skin; a warrior in every sense of the word. Fine black hair dusted his powerful chest and thick forearms. A finer trail of hair skittered down his abdomen and crept beneath the brilliant red and black tartan knotted at his waist. All in all, Circenn Brodie was the most desirable man Lisa had ever seen.

"Use me, Lisa," he encouraged softly. "Take whatever you want." When she made no reply, he said, "You have never been with a man, have you?"

Lisa smoothed the coverlet, her mouth dry. She had no intention of discussing

this with him. She wet her traitorous lips and was appalled when they parted and said, "Is it so apparent?"

"To me. Perhaps not to other men. Why? You are old enough to have been with many men. You are beautiful enough that many must have tried. Did you find none to your liking?"

Lisa hugged the pillow tighter. In high school, she'd had several boyfriends, but they'd always seemed so immature to her. Catherine said it was because she was an only child, that she was more accustomed to being around adults. She'd suspected her mom was right.

"Did I take you from someone? A lover perhaps?" A muscle twitched in his jaw.

"No. There's been no one."

"I find that difficult—nay, impossible to believe."

"Trust me," Lisa said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Men were not exactly beating down my door." If they had been, they would have fled shortly after gaining entrance and discovering her financial straits and her caretaker role.

"Ah, perhaps they were afraid of you, because you are so much woman?"

"I am *not* fat," Lisa bristled. "I'm... healthy," she supplied defensively.

Circenn smiled. "That you are, but that is not what I meant."

"Well, I'm not too tall. A giantess wouldn't be too tall for you." At five feet ten, she had towered over many of the boys in her class until the last two years of high school.

"Not what I meant either."

"Then what did you mean?" she asked, feeling wounded.

"You are smart—"

"No, I'm not," she said. *Anything but smart.*

"Yes, you are. You were smart enough to realize it would be foolish to escape me at Dunnottar, and clever enough to deduce a way out of my chambers. Aye, even

fearless enough to dare it. Tell me, do you read and write?"

"Yes." Inwardly, Lisa glowed. She *was* smart in the fourteenth century.

"You are persistent. Tenacious. Determined. Strong. You doona need anyone, do you?"

"I haven't had the *opportunity* to need anyone. Everyone's always been too busy needing me," she muttered, then felt guilty for voicing her most secret resentment.

"Need *me*, Lisa."

She searched his face. What had changed him? Why was he acting this way? It was as if he genuinely cared and sincerely desired her.

"Need me," he repeated firmly. "Use me to explore the woman who has never been given the opportunity to live. Take from me, need from me, and satisfy all that curiosity I feel burning in you. And by Dagda, let go of that maidenhead. Do you wish to live and die, never having known passion? Never having tasted what I offer you? Be bold. Take." He uttered the last word in a low, masculine tone.

Take. The word lingered in her mind. It was almost as if it had rolled from his tongue imbued with some kind of sorcery. What would it be like to *take*, as he said it—to utterly consume without guilt or fear? *Take* because her blood demanded it, because her body needed it. Lisa's lips parted as she contemplated his words. His upper torso was a vast expanse of olive skin that would be velvety to the touch. Her fingers ached to trail over the hard ridges of his chest, to linger over his shoulders, to curve around his powerful neck and drag him into a kiss that would make her forget where he began and she ended, "I thought you medieval men prized virginity. Don't you think it's wrong for a woman to have her own desires and act on them?"

"Your virginity is a piece of skin, a membrane, Lisa. My first love was long ago and it has not changed who I am in any fashion. Mind you, I am not saying you should give the gift of lovemaking to just anyone. But an obsession with virginity is absurd and serves no purpose but to make a woman turn away from a fine part of her nature. Women and men have the same desires—at least they do until the priests have their go at the women and convince them it is shameful.

What the priests should be saying is 'choose well.'"

"How many—" she broke off quickly. *What a stupid question to ask.* She would sound like a childish, possessive adolescent. But she wanted to know. It said something about the man. A man who'd been with hundreds of women had a real problem, as far as she was concerned.

"Seven." His teeth flashed white against his face.

"That's not very many. I mean for a man, you know," she added hastily.

What would she think if she knew it was only seven in five hundred years? Thousands of times with those seven, enough to know well how to please any woman, but only seven all the same. "Each woman was a country, rich and lush as Scotland, and I loved them with the same dedication and thorough attention I give my homeland. I confess, the first few were naught but the man in me celebrating life when I was less than a score of years. But the last two were wonderful women, both friends and lovers."

"Then why did you leave them?"

A shadow crossed his beautiful face. "They left me," he said softly. *Died. Too young, in a land too harsh.*

"Why?"

"Lisa, touch me." He moved closer, close enough that she could smell the spice of his skin. Close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body, mingling with the heat from hers. Close enough that his lips were a breath and a "yes" away from hers. Tempting, more compelling than her need for basic survival. Fingers extended, she reached for him, but at the last moment she dropped her hand, forming a fist in her lap.

He was silent for a long moment. "You aren't ready yet. Very well. I can wait." He rose in a fluid motion. As he stood, the knot on his tartan slipped and the fabric dropped lower on his hips, giving her a sinful glimpse of what she was denying herself. Her gaze fixed on the black trail of hair that fanned below his belly button, then dropped lower to the thicker hair that peeked above the tartan. The sight of it gave her a heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach, an awful empty pressure. Whether he moved or the plaid slid, she didn't know, but suddenly it

dipped lower, revealing the thick base of his shaft amid silky dark hair. She couldn't see the length of it, but that wasn't what made her heart pound. It was the thickness of him. She would never be able to wrap her hand around it. What would it feel like to have him push that inside her? Her mouth went dry.

His eyes lit appreciatively as her gaze snagged there. "I could pick you up and wrap those lovely long legs of yours around my waist. Slip deep inside you, rock you against me and love you till you lay in my arms and slept like a babe. I will spend each night stretched beside you, teaching you what you want me to teach you. I can feel that you want it from me. Yet it will be at your pace, when you choose. I will wait as long as I must.

"But know this, Lisa—when you are across the dinner table from me on the morrow, in my mind I am pushing you back on a bed. In my fantasy"—he laughed, as if at his own brashness—"you are discovering yourself with my willing body. Who knows, perhaps even laying siege to the heart that beats within this chest." He thumped his chest with a fist and silently admitted she'd already begun to do that, otherwise he wouldn't have offered himself. But she didn't need to know that. He knotted the tartan slowly, never taking his eyes from hers.

"Good night, Lisa. Sleep with the angels."

Her eyes stung from quick tears. It had been her mother's nightly benediction: *Sleep with the angels*. But then he added words her mother never had:

"Then come back to earth and sleep with your devil, who would burn in hell for one night in your arms."

Wow! was all her reeling mind could come up with as he slipped from the room.

CHAPTER 17

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE THEIR FIRST DINNER IN the formal dining room. That was seventy-two hours. Four thousand three hundred and twenty minutes, and Lisa had felt each one of them whiz past her—gone forever.

Nine shifts of nurses had changed at home. Nine meals had been taken by her mother—bland food, she was certain. No ripe plums and apricots carefully selected from the market on her lunch hour. Illness had changed Catherine's appetite, and she'd developed a craving for fruits.

Lisa had spent the days snooping as furtively as possible, but she had begun to suspect it was futile. She didn't have the first idea where to look for the flask. She'd tried his chambers several times during the day, but the door was always locked. She'd even gone to the turret to the left of his chambers to see if there was a way she could manage to scale the outside wall to get there, but it was hopeless. His chambers were on the second floor of the east wing, and there were guards on the battlements above it at all times.

She'd passed the evenings indulging herself in offensively sumptuous meals. Last night, the first course had been a mixture of plums, quince, apples, and pears with rosemary, basil, and rue in a pastry tart. The second course had been a chopped meat pastry, the third an omelet with almonds, currants, honey, and saffron, the fourth roasted salmon in onion and wine sauce, the fifth artichokes stuffed with rice. By the honey-glazed chicken rolled in mustard, rosemary, and pine nuts, she'd been wallowing in guilt. By the berry pastries with whipped cream, she'd despised herself.

And each night, he'd savored his dessert with the same lazy sensuality that made her long to be a berry or a fluff of topping. She couldn't fault his demeanor, he'd been an impeccable dinner companion and host. They'd made cautious small talk; he'd told her of the Templars and their plight, spoke of their training and extolled the strengths of his Highland fortress. She'd asked about his villagers, whom he seemed to know surprisingly little about. He'd asked about her century and she'd made him talk about his instead. When she'd asked about his family, he'd turned the tables and asked about hers. After a few moments of strained evasions, they'd mutually conceded to leave each other alone on that topic.

He seemed to be going out of his way to be gracious, patient, and accommodating. In turn, she'd been carefully reserved, finding an excuse each night to dash from the table after the final course and hole up in her room.

He permitted her escape, for the price of a tantalizing kiss each night at her door. He had not tried again to enter her chambers; she knew he was waiting for her invitation. She also knew she was perilously close to extending it. Each night it was more difficult to find a reason not to take what she so desperately desired. After all, it wasn't as if letting him spend one night in her bed would have the same effect as Persephone eating six seeds in Hades.

Her problem was twofold: Not only was she losing precious time and getting no closer to finding the flask, but she was beginning to adapt in insidious little ways. The immediacy of her presence in fourteenth-century Scotland seemed to be sapping her resolve. She'd never had a time in her life that was so peaceful, so filled with idle time, so safe. No one was relying on her, no one's life would fall apart if she caught a bad cold and was unable to work for a few days. No bills were pressing, no deep blanket of gloom encompassed her.

She felt like such a traitor.

Bills *were* pressing; someone *was* relying on her. And she was helpless to do a damn thing about it until she found that flask.

She sighed, wishing fervently that she had something to do. Work would be cathartic; immersing herself in physical duties was the only way she'd ever managed to keep her demons at bay. Perhaps she could help a few of the maids, insinuate herself into their confidence and learn more about the laird and his customs, like which were his favorite rooms, where he stored his treasures.

Leaping from her perch in the window seat in the study, she went off, determined to track down a job for herself.

* * *

"Gillendria, wait!" Lisa called as the maid hurried down the corridor.

"Milady?" Gillendria paused and turned, her arms heaped with bed linens.

"Where are you going?" Lisa asked, catching up. She extended her hands to relieve a portion of Gillendria's burden. "Here, let me help you carry some of

those."

The maid's face was half hidden behind the mountain of linens, but what Lisa could see of it was quickly transformed by an expression of horror: her blue eyes widened, her dark brows flew up, and her mouth parted in a gasp. "Milady! These are soiled," Gillendria exclaimed.

"That's all right. You're doing wash today. I can help," she said cheerfully.

Gillendria skittered back. "Nay! The laird would banish me!" She turned and scurried down the hall as quickly as she could beneath the towering pile of linens.

Heavens, Lisa thought, I was only trying to help.

* * *

After searching for half an hour, Lisa found the kitchen. It was as splendid as the rest of the castle, spotless, efficiently designed, and currently occupied by a dozen servants preparing the afternoon meal. Buzzing with conversation, warmed by melodic laughter, the kitchen was made even cozier by a brightly leaping fire over which sauces simmered and meats roasted. The flames hissed and flickered as basting juices drizzled onto the logs.

She smiled and called a cheery hello.

All hands stilled: knives stopped dicing in midslice, brushes stopped basting, fingers stopped kneading dough, even the dog curled on the floor near the hearth dropped his head on his paws and whimpered. As one, the servants sank low in deference to her station. "Milady," they murmured nervously.

Lisa studied the frozen tableau for a moment, struck by the absurdity of the situation. Why hadn't she anticipated this? She knew her history. No one in the castle would permit her to labor: not the kitchen staff, not the laundress, not even the maids dusting the tapestries. She was a lady—and a lady was to be kept, not to keep.

But she didn't know how to be kept. Depressed, she mumbled a courteous goodbye and fled the kitchen.

Lisa sank into a chair by the hearth in the Greathall and indulged herself in a

serious brood. She had two things with which to occupy her mind: her mother and Circenn—both were dangerous, although for vastly different reasons. She was considering cleaning out the hearth and scrubbing the stones when Circenn entered.

He glanced at her. "Lass," he greeted her. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes," she replied with a dejected sigh.

"What's amiss?" he asked. "I mean other than the usual—that which is always amiss with you. Perhaps I shall preface each conversation we have by assuring you that I still cannot return you. Now, what has you looking glum so early on a fine Highland morn?"

"Sarcasm does not become you," Lisa muttered.

He bared his teeth in a smile, and although she kept her face inscrutable, inwardly she sighed with pleasure. Tall, powerful, and utterly gorgeous, he was a vision a woman could get used to seeing first thing in the morning. He was wearing his tartan and a white linen shirt. His sporran was buckled around him, accentuating his trim waist and long muscled legs. He'd just shaved, and a bit of water glistened on his jaw. And he was huge—she liked that, a mountain of masculinity.

"What do you expect me to do with myself, Circenn Brodie?" she asked irritably.

He was very still. "What did you call me?"

Lisa hesitated, wondering if the arrogant man could really expect her to call him "milord," even after he'd offered himself to her a few nights ago. Fine. It would keep things impersonal. She rose and bowed sweepingly. "My lord," she purred.

"Sarcasm does not become you. That is the first time I've heard my name on your lips. As we are to be wed, you must use it henceforth. You may call me Cin."

Lisa blinked at him from her servile position. *Sin*. That he was. And that was the bulk of her problem. If he were not so irresistible, she wouldn't feel so alive around him, ergo she wouldn't constantly feel so guilty about her mom. Had he been an unattractive, spineless, stupid man, she would have felt miserable every

minute of the day—and that would have been acceptable. She *should* be miserable. She had abandoned her own mother, for heaven's sake. Her back stiffened and she stood up straight. "Perhaps I should preface each of our conversations as well, by reminding you that I won't be marrying you. *My lord.*"

A corner of his mouth quirked. "You are truly possessed of a streak of defiance, aren't you? What did the men in your time make of it?"

Before she could answer, Duncan came bounding into the hall, followed by Galan. "Morning all, and a fine day it is, eh?" Duncan said brightly.

Lisa snorted. Couldn't the handsome Highlander be pessimistic just once?

"Circenn, Galan was down in the village early this morning, hearing some of the disputes that have backed up in the manor courts—"

"Isn't the lord supposed to decide those?" Lisa asked acerbically.

Circenn's gaze shot to her. "How would you know that? And what business of yours is it?"

Lisa blinked innocently. "I must have overheard it somewhere. And I was merely curious."

"One would think you might learn to tame that curiosity, seeing where it has led you."

"And while Galan was in the village," Duncan forged on, "he realized the villagers are expecting to have a celebration."

"I don't understand why you don't hear the cases. Aren't you the laird?" Lisa pushed. "Or are you just too busy mucking up everyone else's life and brooding all the time?" she added sweetly. Her inactivity was getting on her nerves, and if she didn't start being mean to him, she'd end up being entirely too nice. Her resolve might not withstand another dessert with him.

Duncan's laughter rang to the rafters.

"It's none of your business why I doona hear them," Circenn growled.

"Fine. Nothing's any of my business, is it? What do you expect me to do? Just sit

around, ask no questions, have no desires, and be a lump of spineless femininity?"

"You could not be spineless if you tried," Circenn said with a long-suffering sigh.

"A celebration," Duncan said loudly. "The villagers are planning for the feast—"

"*What* are you blathering about?" Circenn grudgingly rerouted his attention to Duncan.

"If you would permit me to complete an entire sentence, you might know," Duncan said evenly.

"Well?" Circenn encouraged. "You have my full attention."

"The villagers wish to celebrate your return and the upcoming wedding."

"No celebration," Lisa said immediately.

"The idea is appealing," Circenn countered.

Lisa glared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I am not marrying you, remember? I'm not going to be here."

The three warriors turned to regard her as if she'd just informed them she would sprout wings and fly back to her time.

"I will not be party to this," she snapped.

"A celebration might be just the thing for you, lass," Duncan said. "And you will have the opportunity to meet your people."

"They are not my people, nor will they ever be," Lisa said stiffly. "I won't be here." With that she turned and fled up the stairs.

* * *

But she found she couldn't stay away for long. Stealthily, she crept back to the top of the stairs, fascinated by the events ongoing below.

They were planning her wedding, and it was enough to boggle the mind.

There they were, sprawled around the table in the Greathall, and the overbearing but irresistibly sexy hunk of a Highland laird had his hands buried in fabric.

"Nay. It is not soft enough. Gillendria, go fetch the silks stored in the tapestry room. Adam gave me something that should suit well. Bring me the bolt of gold silk."

Duncan leaned back in his chair, his arms folded behind his head and his boots propped on the table. The front legs of his chair hovered precariously a few inches above the floor, then hit the floor with a thump when Galan kicked the back of the chair.

"What is wrong with you, Galan?" Duncan complained.

"Keep your feet off the table," Galan reprimanded. "They're dirty."

"Leave him be, Galan. The table can be wiped," Circenn said absently, fingering a pale blue wool and discarding it with a shake of his head.

Duncan and Galan looked at Circenn as if he'd lost his mind. "What have we come to? Mud on the table? You—sorting through fabric? Does this mean tugging in the kitchen is acceptable now, too?" Duncan asked, disbelievingly.

"Far be it from me to regulate tugging," Circenn said mildly, lifting a fold of crimson velvet.

Galan snapped Duncan's mouth shut with a finger beneath his chin. "I thought you hated the gifts Adam brought you, Circenn," Galan reminded the laird.

Circenn tossed aside a pale rose linen. "Only bold colors for the lass," he told the maids. "Except perhaps lavender." He glanced at the seamstress standing near his chair. "Have you any lavender?"

At the top of the stairs, Lisa blushed. He was obviously recalling her bra and panties. The thought sent a flush of heat through her. But then her brow furrowed: Who was Adam and why did he bring gifts and why did Circenn hate them? She shook her head, watching him pick through the bolts spread across the table. A half-dozen women were gathered around Circenn, picking up the fabrics he had approved.

"A cloak from the velvet," he said, "with black fur at the rim of the hood and cuffs. My colors," he added smugly.

Lisa froze, thrown off balance by the possessive note in his voice. *My colors*, he'd said, but she'd clearly heard him say, *my woman*.

And it had thrilled her.

She stepped back quickly and ducked into a corner, leaning against the wall, her heart pounding.

What was she doing?

She'd been standing at the top of the stairs in the fourteenth century, watching him select fabric for her wedding gown!

Dear God, she was completely *losing* herself. The immediacy of the present was so compelling, so rich and exciting, that it was eroding her ties to her real life, undermining her determination to return to her mother.

She sank to the floor and closed her eyes, forcing herself to think of Catherine, to imagine what she was doing, how sick with worry she was, how alone. Lisa remained crouched on the floor, brutally forcing herself back to reality until she felt tears sting her eyes.

And then she rose, determined to take control of things for once and for all.

CHAPTER 18

LISA PRESSED BACK INTO THE DEEP STONE ARCH OF THE doorway, scarcely daring to breathe. Her feet were numb and cramped from huddling on the chilly floor. She tightened her fingers around the hilt of the knife she'd filched from the kitchen. It was a lethal blade, razor sharp, as wide as her palm and at least twelve inches long. It would serve nicely to demonstrate her point. She was through biding her time and trying patiently to find the flask. She was going to get back to the future—now.

Watching him plan her wedding gown had been the final straw: Circenn had accepted that she was going to be here forever—worse, she had started to accept it as well. Concealing the knife in the folds of her gown, she'd slipped up to the second floor and hidden in the shadows of a doorway diagonal to Circenn's chambers, waiting for him to come up to change for dinner, as he did every night. She conceded that if she hadn't had an ill mother, she might well have embraced this experience. In her century, there were no men who could begin to compare to the masculine splendor of Circenn Brodie. But Catherine needed her and would always come first.

The staircase creaked faintly and she tensed. Peeking around the corner of the doorway she glimpsed Circenn gliding silently down the hallway. For such a large man he certainly moved quietly. In a moment, his back was to her. He inserted the key in the lock and she realized the time was upon her. She would obtain the flask, no matter whom she had to go through to get it. No more passive, bewildered, susceptible-to-seduction Lisa.

She surged from her hiding place, pressed the tip of the blade to his back, directly in line with his heart, and commanded, "Move. In the door. *Now*." Placing her other hand at the small of his back, she pushed him forward.

His spine went rigid beneath her palm.

"Now, I said. Get in the room."

Circenn kicked the door open and entered the chamber.

"Stop," she ordered. "Do not turn around."

"I saw you spying in the Greathall, lass," he said easily. "If you doona like the gold silk, you needn't get so fussy about it. You may select your own gown. It was not my intention to offend you with my choice."

"Don't be obtuse. You know that's not what I'm upset about," she hissed. "The flask, Brodie. Now. Get it." She pressed the tip of the blade harder against his back to illustrate her resolve, and bit her lip when a drop of blood blossomed below his shoulder blade, spreading on the white linen of his shirt. She wished desperately that she could see his face. Was it dark with fury? Was he amused at her tenacity, or foolishly underestimating her resolve?

He sighed heavily. "For what purpose do you wish my flask? Are you in truth the traitor we feared?"

"No! I want to go home. I have no desire for your flask, I only need it to take me back."

"You still believe the flask will return you?"

"It brought me here—"

"I have explained to you—"

"All you've said is that it isn't the flask's power, but you won't tell me what it *can* do. Do you expect me to trust your word? Why should I?"

"I would not lie to you, lass. But I see that you will not believe me. Had I known you still harbored this foolish hope, I would have obliged you sooner." He pivoted so swiftly that she fumbled, but recovered and jabbed the tip of the knife into his chest. More blood blossomed as the lethally sharpened blade slipped through his shirt as if it were butter.

"Careful with that thing, lass. Unless it pleases you to ruin my shirts."

"Don't move and I won't have to cut you," she snapped.

He dropped his hands to his side. "I must move to collect the flask."

"I'll follow you."

"Nay, you will not. I will not take you to my lair."

"I am the one with the knife," she reminded him. "And it currently rests above your heart."

If he moved, she didn't see it. All she knew was that one moment she had the knife at his chest, and the next it was gone.

She blinked, trying to bring the room back into focus.

The blade was flush against her throat.

Her eyes flared wide and she gasped. "How did you do that?"

"You cannot control me, lass. No one can," he said wearily. "If I give to you, it is because I choose to give to you. And, Lisa, I would choose to give you everything, if you would but permit."

"Then give me the flask," she demanded, ignoring the cold metal at her neck.

"Why do you seek it? To what do you wish to return? I have told you I will wed you and care for you. I am offering you my home."

A groan of frustration escaped her. Nothing was working out as she'd planned. He had so easily disarmed her, stripped away her control. *I am offering you my home*, he had said, and a treacherous part of her was deeply intrigued by that offer. She was doing it again—vacillating. She glared at him, a sheen of tears clouding her vision.

At the sight of her tears, he flung the knife to the bed, where it landed with a soft thud. Pulling her into his arms, he caressed her hair tenderly. "Tell me, lass, what is it? What causes you to weep?"

Lisa pulled from his embrace. Thrumming with frustration, she began pacing between him and the door. "Where is my baseball cap, anyway? Did you have to take that away from me, too?"

He cocked his head. "Your base ball cap?" he repeated awkwardly.

"My"—what had he called it?—"bonnet."

He moved to a chest beneath a window, lifted the lid, and retrieved her clothing. Her jeans and T-shirt had been neatly folded, and atop them was her cap.

She leaped toward him and snatched it greedily from his hand, clutching it to her breast. It seemed a lifetime ago that she and her father had sat in the third row, in the blue seats, directly behind home base. They'd laughed and yelled at the baseball players, drunk sodas and eaten hot dogs drenched with mustard and relish. She'd decided that very day that she would one day marry a man just like her daddy. Charming, smart, with a fabulous sense of humor, tender, and always willing to take time for his family.

Then she'd met this capable, mighty warrior, and in his shadow the real Jack Stone had come into sharper focus. As had her real feelings about him.

She was angry at her father. Angry at his irresponsibility: his failure to have cars serviced, to take out life insurance, to carry adequate auto coverage, to plan for a future that might stretch beyond his present. In so many ways her father had been an overgrown child, no matter how charming he was. But Circenn Brodie would always plan for his family's future. If he wed, he would keep his wife and children safe, no matter the cost to himself. Circenn Brodie took precautions, controlled his environment, and built an impenetrable fortress for those he called his own.

"Talk to me, lass."

Lisa dragged herself from her bitter thoughts.

"If you tell me why you seek so desperately to return, I will bring you the flask. Is it a man?" he asked warily. "I thought you told me there had been no one."

The tension that had quickened in her veins while she'd sat in the doorway, clutching the knife and waiting for him, dissipated suddenly. She chided herself for her foolishness: She should have foreseen that force wouldn't work with this man.

The primary reason she'd refused to discuss Catherine with him was that she hadn't wanted to make a fool of herself, to start talking and end up weeping openly before the impassive warrior. But her emotions were no longer under her control, and the need to talk consumed her, the need to have someone to trust, to confide in. Her defenses slipped further, leaving her raw and exposed. She sank to the floor. "No. It's nothing like that. It's my mother," she whispered.

"Your mother what?" he pushed gently, sinking down beside her.

"She's d-dying," she said. She dropped her head forward, creating a curtain with her hair.

"Dying?"

"Yes." She drew a deep breath. "I'm all she has left, Circenn. She's ill and won't live much longer. I was taking care of her, feeding her, working to support us. Now she is completely alone." Once the words had started coming, they tumbled forth more easily. Maybe he *did* care enough to help her. Maybe if she told him all of it, he would find a way to return her.

"She was in a car wreck five years ago. We all were. My daddy died in it." She stroked the baseball cap lovingly. "He bought me this a week before the wreck." A bittersweet smile crossed her face at the memory. "The Reds won that day, and we went to dinner afterward with Mom, and that's the last time I remember us all being together except for the day of the wreck. It's my last good memory. After that, all I see are the crushed, jagged pieces of a blue Mercedes covered with blood and..."

Circenn winced. Placing a finger beneath her chin, he forced her to look at him. "Och, lass," he whispered. He traced her tears with his thumb, his eyes mirroring her grief.

Lisa was soothed by his compassion. She'd never spoken aloud of this, even to Ruby, although her best friend had tried many times to get her to talk about it. She was discovering that it wasn't as hard to confide in him as she'd feared. "Mom was crippled in the car wreck—

"Car wreck?" he asked softly.

She struggled to explain. "Machines. The Mercedes was a car. In my time we don't ride horses, we have metal"—she searched for a word to which he might relate—"carriages that carry us. Fast, sometimes too fast. The tire... er, wheel of the carriage came apart and we crashed into other machines. Daddy was crushed behind the steering wheel and died instantly." Lisa blew out a breath and paused for a moment. "When they released me from the hospital, I found a job as quickly as I could, and a second one to take care of me and Mom and pay the

bills. We lost everything," she whispered. "It was horrible. We couldn't pay the lawsuits, so they took our home and everything we had. And I'd accepted it—I *had*—I'd accepted that was how my life would be, until you took me away in the middle of something that I have to finish. My mother has cancer and only a short time to live. No one is there to feed her, pay the bills, or hold her hand."

Circenn swallowed. He could not interpret much of what Lisa had said, but he understood that her mother was dying and she had been trying to take care of everything for quite some time. "She is entirely alone? There is no other of your clan left alive?"

Lisa shook her head. "Families aren't like yours in my time. My father's parents died long ago, and my mother was adopted. Now there's only Mom, and I'm stuck here."

"Och, lass." He drew her into his arms.

"Don't try to comfort me," she cried, pushing against his chest. "It's my fault. I'm the one who had to work in a museum. I'm the one who had to touch that damned flask. I'm the selfish one."

Circenn dropped his hands and expelled a frustrated breath. There was not one selfish bone in her body, yet she was lambasting herself, carrying the blame for everything. He watched helplessly as she rocked back and forth, her arms wrapped around herself—a posture of deep grieving he'd seen far too many times in his life. "No one has ever been there to comfort you, have they?" he asked grimly.

"You carried the weight of it all alone. This is untenable. This is what a husband is for," he muttered.

"I don't have one."

"Well, you do now," he said. "Let me be strong enough for both of us. I can, you know."

She wiped angrily at her tears with the back of her hand. "I can't. Now do you see why I must return? For God's sake, will you *please* give me the flask? You promised when we were at Dunnottar that if there was a way for me to return, you would help me. Was that something you said merely to placate me? Must I

beg? Is that what you want?"

"Nay, lass," he said violently. "I never want that from you. I will give you the flask, but I must collect it. It is in a safe place. Will you trust me? Will you go to your chambers and await me there?"

Lisa searched his face frantically. "Will you really bring it?" she whispered.

"Aye. Lisa, I'd bring you the stars if it would cease your tears. I did not know. I knew none of this. You did not tell me."

"You never asked."

Circenn scowled as he mentally kicked himself. She was right. He hadn't. Not once had he said, *Excuse me, lass, but were you doing something when I snatched you out of time with my curse? Were you wed? Did you have children? A dying mother who relied upon you, perhaps?* He helped her to her feet, but the moment she had her balance she tugged her arm from his hand.

"How long will it take you to retrieve it?"

"A short time, a quarter hour, no more."

"If you don't come to me, I will return with a bigger knife."

"You won't need a knife, lass," he assured her. "I will bring it."

She left silently, carrying part of his heart out the door with her.

* * *

Circenn opened his secret chamber and grimly retrieved the flask from the hidden compartment in the stone floor. It had never occurred to him that she'd had a full life in her time; he'd been so selfish that he'd never once asked her what he'd taken her away from. He had seen her only as proud, tenacious, sensual Lisa, as if she'd lived nowhere before she had come to him, but now he understood clearly. She had sacrificed most of her adult years caring for her mother, carrying burdens a laird would stagger beneath, nurturing the only clan she had left. It explained much: her resistance to adaptation, her continued attempts to search his castle, her illogical unwillingness to give up on the flask as a way to return home. He knew Lisa was an intelligent woman, and he

suspected that deep down she realized that the flask wouldn't return her, but if she formally gave up on the flask, she would have no hope. People often clung to irrational hopes to avoid despair.

His heart wept for her, because he knew that the only man who could return her would see her dead first. For the first time in his life he was furious with himself for refusing to learn the things Adam had so often offered to teach him.

Come train with my kind, Adam had coaxed on numerous occasions. *Let me teach you the fae arts. Let me show you the worlds you might explore.*

Never, Circenn had replied scornfully. *I will never become like you.*

But the magic is inside you—

I will never accept it.

Yet now he would have given anything for the art of sifting time. Anything Adam wanted at all. He straightened his shoulders, closed the hidden chamber, and moved to the door. How could he have been so blind as not to realize that she'd had a life and lost it? How could he have ever thought she was duplicitous? The image of her huge green eyes, shimmering with tears as she'd gazed up at him, refusing his solace because she'd obviously never been given comfort and didn't know how to accept it, would burn forever in his mind.

He had a difficult path to walk with her now. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, bracing himself for her discovery that she was truly trapped. With a deep sigh, he left his chambers.

"Lass," he said softly.

Lisa glanced up as he entered the room. She was huddled in the center of her bed, her pale face stained with tears. He fished about in his sporran and moved slowly to her side, making a journey he was reluctant to complete.

"Stand up, lass," he said quietly.

Lisa rose swiftly.

He held out the flask.

"You brought it," she whispered.

"I told you I would. I should have done so before now. I knew you wanted it. I saw the look on your face when we were riding from Dunnottar and you glimpsed it in my pack."

"You can read me so easily?"

"Not always. Sometimes I can't read you at all, but that night I could. You'd been crying—"

"I was not. I almost never cry. I only cried now because I'm so frustrated."

"My apologies—it had been raining," he corrected swiftly, protecting her pride. His heart was touched: She was embarrassed by her tears. There was no shame in weeping. He'd seen her cheeks wet with tears several nights on their journey, but they'd been quiet tears, and he'd assumed it was part of her acceptance of her transition, never suspecting she was grieving over her mother. He was amazed that she hadn't wept openly before now. But she was resilient and tough, and that gave him hope that she would recover in time.

"That night it was raining," she agreed. "Go on."

"You glimpsed the flask as I removed an extra plaid. To protect you from the rain," he teased, hoping to lighten her grim mood.

She arched a brow, but her eyes were sad, filled with unshed tears.

He sighed and continued. "And I saw the hope in your eyes—a hope that centered upon my flask. I knew it couldn't return you, so I dismissed the thought, but I should have realized that you would need to prove to yourself that it wouldn't work," he said gently.

"Give it to me," she demanded.

He dreaded this, dreaded the moment when he would see in her lovely green eyes stark certainty that she could never return. He proffered the shimmering silver flask in silence.

She reached for it. "How does it work?" she whispered.

"It doesn't," he whispered back. "You only think it does."

Her fingers closed on the flask. He watched as she wrapped her hand reverently around it. Wrapped both hands around it, did something funny with her feet, and closed her eyes. She muttered softly.

"What are you saying?"

"There's no place like home." The words were half mumbled but painfully clear to his ears. He winced. Aye, there was no place like home, he agreed silently, and he would do his best to make this feel like home to her, since he was the one who'd uprooted her with his thoughtless curse. "I am verra sorry, lass," he said softly, his brogue thickened by emotion.

She didn't open her eyes, refused to move. Finally she crossed to the bed and lowered herself on it, tightly holding the flask. She looked as if she was mentally reciting every prayer or rhyme she'd ever learned. After a long time, she rose and stood by the fire.

She stood like that, frozen, clutching the flask, for so long he finally sank into a chair beside her. How much time passed, he had no idea, but he would not move an inch until she accepted it, and then he would be there to wrap her in the shelter of his body.

Full night had descended when she finally stirred, the dinner hour long past. Her hair shimmered in the firelight, her face was ashen, and her lashes were dark fans against her pale skin. He cursed when a tear slipped down her cheek.

When she finally opened her eyes he saw pain in the brilliant green depths. Denial and acceptance warred on her expressive features—acceptance the brutal victor. She had held the flask, she had performed whatever ritual she believed in, and she had experienced incontestable defeat.

"It didn't work," she said in a small voice.

"Och, lass," he said with a sigh, helpless to alleviate her suffering.

She began to fiddle with the stopper on the flask.

"What are you doing?" he thundered, half rising from the chair, ready to rip the

flask from her hand.

"Perhaps if I drink this?" she said hesitantly.

"Never, lass," he said, his olive complexion paling. "Trust me, you *doona* wish to do something so foolish."

"What's in it?" she gasped, clearly stricken by his reaction.

"Lisa, what is in that flask would not only fail to return you to your home, it would be the purest glimpse of hell for you. I would not lie to you. It is a poison of the vilest origin."

He didn't need to say more to convince her. He could see her acceptance that not only wouldn't it take her home, it might kill her—or make her wish she were dead. He understood that Lisa, as sensible as she was, had now acknowledged that she'd been clinging to an impossible hope and would not do so again. If he said it wouldn't work, that was enough. By trusting her, he had gained her trust.

She sniffed and, to her apparent chagrin, another tear slipped out. She dropped her head forward to hide behind her hair in the way he'd noticed she did when she was uncomfortable or embarrassed.

Circenn moved swiftly, intending to catch the tear upon his finger, kiss it away, then kiss away all her pain and fear, and assure her that he would permit no harm to touch her and would spend his life making things up to her; but she dropped the flask onto the table and turned swiftly.

"Please, leave me alone," she said and turned away from him.

"Let me comfort you, Lisa," he entreated.

"Leave me alone."

For the first time in his life, Circenn felt utterly helpless. *Let her grieve*, his heart instructed. She would need to grieve, for discovering that the flask didn't work was tantamount to lowering her mother into a solitary grave. She would grieve her mother as if she'd in truth died that very day. *May God forgive me*, he prayed. *I did not know what I was doing when I cursed that flask*. He snatched the flask from the table, tucked it into his sporran, and left the room.

* * *

And that was that, Lisa admitted, curling up on the bed and pulling the curtains tight. In her cozy nest all she lacked was her stuffed Tigger and her mother's shoulder to cry on, but such comforts would never again be hers. As long as she hadn't tried the flask, she'd been able to pin all her hopes on it. She'd been astonished by Circenn's reaction to her confession—she'd glimpsed a kindred moisture in his eyes.

You're falling, Lisa, her heart said softly, *for more than a country.*

Good thing, she told her heart acerbically, *because it looks like he's all I've got, for now and forever.*

She glanced around the curtained bed and snuggled deeper into the covers. The fire made her chamber toasty, and there was a flask of cider wine in a cubbyhole in the headboard. As she took a deep swallow, savoring the spicy, fruity taste, she gave in to her grief. Her mother would die alone and there was nothing Lisa could do to prevent it. She drank and cried until she was too exhausted to do more than roll onto her side and slip into the gentle, wine-induced oblivion of sleep.

All I wanted was to hold her hand when she died was her last thought before dreaming.

* * *

Circenn Brodie stood beside the bed and watched Lisa sleep. He parted the filmy bed curtains and stepped close, dropping his hand to lightly touch her hair. Curled on her side, she'd folded both hands beneath one cheek, like a child. The faded red bill of her bonnet—base ball cap, he reminded himself—was crushed between her hands and a plaid she'd bunched up into a pillow of sorts. She had clearly cried herself to sleep, and it looked as if she had fought a losing battle with her covers. Gently, he eased the plaid away from her neck so she wouldn't strangle herself with it, then straightened the fabric twisted about her legs. She sighed and snuggled deeper into the soft mattress. Removing the wineskin from where it was nestled close to her side, he winced when he discovered it was empty, although he understood what had driven her to drink it.

She had been seeking oblivion, a quest he'd embarked upon a time or two

himself.

She was lost. Torn from her home. Stranded in the middle of a century she couldn't possibly understand.

And it was his fault.

He would marry her, help her adjust, protect her from discovery—and most of all, protect her from Adam Black. One way or another, he promised himself firmly, he would make her smile again and win her heart. She was everything Brude and more. His mother would have loved this woman.

"Sleep with the angels, my Brude queen," he said softly. *But come back. This devil needs you like he's never needed anything before.*

As he turned to leave he spared a last glance over his shoulder. A faint smile curved his lips as he recalled her fascination with whipped cream. He hoped one day she would trust him, desire him enough to allow him to take his spoonful of whipped cream, trail it across her lovely body, and remove the sweet confection with his tongue.

He would heal her. With his love.

And he would never die on her—that he could promise.

* * *

"What's wrong?" Galan asked, taking one look at Circenn's grim expression as he entered the Greathall.

The laird dropped himself heavily into a chair and picked up a flask of cider wine, absently turning it in his hands.

"Is it Lisa?" Duncan asked swiftly. "What happened? I thought the two of you were... growing closer."

"I gave her the flask," Circenn grunted, barely intelligible.

"You *what*?" Galan roared, leaping from the chair. "You made her like you?"

"Nay." Circenn waved an impatient hand. "I would never do that. I merely gave it to her so she could see for herself it would not return her to her home." He

paused, then raised his eyes from the floor. "I found out why she wants to return so badly," he said. Then, haltingly, he told him what Lisa had confided.

"Och, Christ," Duncan said when he was finished. "This is a fankle. Can you not return her? It *is* her mother." Galan murmured his agreement.

Circenn shrugged and spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I doona know how. The only creature who knows how is Adam—"

"And Adam would kill her," Duncan finished bitterly.

"Aye."

Duncan shook his head. "I never knew. She told me that a woman was depending on her, but she wouldn't tell me more."

"She told you that?" Circenn snapped.

"Aye."

Circenn's lips twitched bitterly. "Well, here I have been offering to be her husband and she didn't tell me that much."

"Did you ever ask?" Galan asked softly.

Circenn muttered a curse, uncapped the wine, and started to drink.

CHAPTER 19

ARMAND GRITTED HIS TEETH AND PERMITTED JAMES Comyn to vent his anger, assuring himself that soon the tables would be turned, and then he would revel in crushing the traitorous Scot. He understood the Comyn's motivations well. Ten years ago, when Robert the Bruce had slain Red John Comyn in Greyfriars Kirk at Dumfries, thereby eliminating the only other real contender for the Scottish crown, the remainder of the Comyn clan had eagerly allied themselves with the English. They were avid to murder any relative of the Bruce they could get their hands on.

"It has been weeks, Berard! And you bring me nothing. No woman, no sacred hallows."

Armand shrugged. "I have done all I can. The woman has not left her chambers in weeks. She stays holed up there, although I cannot fathom why."

"Then go in and get her," Comyn spat. "The war grows fiercer, and the Bruce's brother Edward has made a foolish wager."

"What say you?" Armand had heard nothing of this.

"Only last night he made a wager that may win or lose this war. King Edward is most displeased."

"What wager?" Armand pressed.

"It is not my place to speak of it. Even the Bruce hasn't received word of it yet, and he will be furious when he hears what his brother has done. It is imperative that we capture the woman. At least then we will have something to appease his temper. You must get her," Comyn ordered.

"There are guards outside her chambers day and night, James. I must wait until she comes out." He raised a hand as the Comyn started to argue. "She will have to come out soon." And while he waited, he would continue to search the castle for the sacred hallows. Thus far he'd managed to search only the north wing; somehow, he had to get into both the laird's and the lady's chambers.

"A fortnight, Berard. Any longer and I cannot assure you I will be able to

prevent King Edward from ordering his men to attack."

"It will be done before a fortnight is up."

* * *

Lisa rolled over, stretching gingerly. She knew that she would have to leave her bed eventually but hadn't been able to face it. She sat up slowly, surprised to discover that the painful knot in her chest seemed to have loosened. She glanced around her room as if seeing it for the first time.

She'd been sleeping more than sixteen hours a day and wondered if perhaps the past five years had finally claimed their price. She'd slept and grieved for everything—not just her mother, but the car accident, her father's death, and the loss of her childhood. She hadn't let herself feel any of that for five years, and when she'd finally permitted a tiny sliver of pain, all of it had come crashing in and she'd lost herself for a time. She hadn't realized how much buried anger she held. She suspected that only a bit of it had been released.

But now she had to face the facts: The flask would not return her, Circenn could not curse her back, and this was going to be her life—for the rest of her life.

She rose from the bed, rubbing her neck to ease the kinks. She had no idea how long it had been since she'd bathed. Disgusted with her protracted inertia, she moved to the door. While closeted in her room, she'd been dimly aware that men were posted outside in the corridor. She'd never spoken to them, had merely accepted the food they handed in through the door and picked at it listlessly.

She fumbled with the handle and pulled the door open.

Circenn crashed in and hit the floor. He rolled smoothly onto his back and sprang to his feet, hand on his sword, looking dazed. She realized he must have been sitting on the floor, leaning back against it, and when she'd opened it she'd taken him by surprise. He blinked several times, as if he'd fallen asleep in that position and been awakened abruptly. She was startled and touched: Had he been outside her room all this time?

He gazed down at her and they regarded each other silently. There were dark circles under his dark eyes, his face was lined with fatigue and worry, and the look he gave her was so tender and self-effacing that it made her catch her

breath.

"A bath," she said softly. "Might I have a bath?"

His smile was slow to form, but dazzling when it did. "Absolutely, lass. Wait right here. Doona move. I'll see to the preparation myself." He rushed out to fulfill her request.

* * *

"She wants a bath," Circenn bellowed, barreling into the Greathall. He'd been waiting weeks for some spark of life. That she was aware of her body again meant she was slowly retreating from the dark place within, where she'd languished so long. He roared for the maids, who came at a run.

"Have hot water drawn immediately. And a meal. Send her all the tempting food you can find. And wine. Clothing! She must have clean clothing as well. See to my lady. She wants a bath!"

He smiled. By Dagda, the day was looking brighter already.

* * *

The last person Lisa would have imagined might slip into her chambers while she was bathing was Eirren. She'd indulged in a two-second fantasy that Circenn might come in uninvited, with seduction on his mind, but had quickly squashed that thought, obviously a leftover from the historical romances she'd devoured in lieu of a social life. Things like that didn't really happen. What really happened was that small, mischievous children invaded. "What are you doing in here, Eirren?" She swished her hands in the water, trying to whisk up more bubbles to cover her breasts. When that failed, she placed her wash cloth atop them.

The rascal grinned broadly, waggling his brows in a comically lecherous expression.

"I didn't even hear you open the door." She sank lower in the tub.

"Ye were too engrossed in yer bath, lassie. I even knocked," he lied. He moved swiftly to the hearth near Lisa.

"I hardly think this is appropriate," she said. Then she regarded him thoughtfully. "On second thought, it's perfectly appropriate. You may use my bath when I'm

done, and we'll finally get you clean."

Eirren grinned puckishly. "In order to do that, ye'll have to be gettin' out. For my first look at a naked lass, I'd even consent to washin' meself. For a look at ye, I'd wash twice. Behind me ears, even."

His grin faded as he took a seat on the stone base of the hearth. "Are ye feelin' better, lassie? Ye've been in here a long time. I couldna help but hear grim gossip."

Lisa was touched. "You were worried about me, weren't you? That's why you came today."

"Aye, I was," Eirren muttered. "And I dinna like it a bit. I overheard the men sayin' ye really are from another time and ye discovered ye can never return." He looked at her questioningly.

"That is so," Lisa said sadly.

"Will ye be givin' up on life, lassie?"

Lisa glanced at him sharply. "Sometimes you seem far older than thirteen, Eirren."

He shrugged his bony shoulders. "'Tis the way of this world. Children doona stay children long. We see too much."

Lisa felt a flash of longing to shield his eyes, to ensure he never again glimpsed anything a child shouldn't see. Then she caught him trying to peek beneath the water line. "Stop that!" She splashed water at him.

He laughed and wiped his face gamely. "'Tis natural. I'm a lad. But I'll be lookin' out yon window if it makes ye feel better."

She smiled, watching him lift his chin and turn his face toward the window, making quite a production of it. He was such a melodramatic boy.

"Will ye be wedding the laird?" he asked after a moment.

Lisa's brows lifted as she pondered that. A shiver skittered up her spine. She could not return home. *This* was her life. What would Catherine want her to

make of it? Lisa knew the answer to that. Catherine would have fussed and cosseted and dressed Lisa in the finest wedding gown, pushed her into bed with the brawny Highlander, and hovered outside the door to ascertain that Lisa made appropriately satisfied honeymoon sounds.

"I do believe I will," she said slowly, trying to accustom herself to the thought.

Eirren clapped his hands and beamed at her. "Ye willna regret it."

Lisa's eyes narrowed astutely. "Do you have a special interest in this, Eirren?"

"I merely wish to be seein' a lassie happy."

"That's not all of it," Lisa said. "Confess. You like the laird, don't you? You admire him and you think he needs to get married, don't you?"

Eirren nodded, his eyes bright. "I suppose I have a fondness for him."

Probably because his own father didn't have much time for him, she thought. Circenn Brodie would be easy for a lad to worship. "Hand me my towel, Eirren," Lisa ordered. She would get the filthy boy in the bath if she had to parade around nude to do it. Someone needed to take responsibility for him, treat him to tender arms and loving discipline.

With an arch glance, he picked up her towel and, with an exaggerated swing of his arm, flung it far across the room to land on the bed. "Get it yerself."

She gave him her most forbidding you-will-obey-me-little-boy-or-die glance. They waged a battle with their glares—his challenging, hers promising divine retribution—until with a gamin grin he leaped to his feet, slipped behind her, and was gone. She didn't even hear the door open and close.

She sighed and leaned her head back against the tub, admitting that she hadn't really wanted to leave the warm, soapy water anyway. "I'll get you for this, Eirren," she vowed. "You will have a bath before the week is out."

She wasn't certain but she thought she heard a soft tinkle of laughter outside the door.

* * *

The sun was shining, Lisa observed with pleasure. After bathing, she had slipped

on a clean gown but forgone slippers. While the maids had removed her bath water, she'd flung open the window and realized that spring had graced the countryside while she'd grieved. She'd felt a fierce need to venture outside, to feel the sun, to savor the birdsong, to connect with what was to be her world. God, she needed to get out of her room. It was suffocating after so long.

She strolled the courtyard at a leisurely pace, curling her bare toes in the lush green grass. Following the perimeter wall of the castle, she was acutely aware of the curious gazes of the guards in the high towers. They watched her intently, and she suspected that Circenn had instructed them not to let her slip from their sight. Rather than feeling guarded or trapped, she found it comforting. While finishing her bath she'd realized that she'd been lucky; things could have been much worse. She might have been dumped through time into the keep of a true barbarian, who would have abused her, turned her out, or simply killed her.

She skirted a small grove of trees and paused, captivated by a clear reflecting pool encircled by smooth white rocks and cornered by four massive standing stones with Pict inscriptions. Lured by history, she trailed her fingertips over the engravings. A lovely stone bench squatted in a small copse before an unusual mound of earth that was about twenty feet long and a dozen feet wide. It was nearly as tall as she was, and the grass on it was a brilliant green, thicker and lusher than the rest of the lawn. Her toes ached to touch it. She stood regarding it, wondering what it was. A medieval burial mound?

"It is a fairy mound. A *shian*," Circenn said, moving behind her. He placed his hand on her waist and inhaled the clean fragrance of her freshly washed hair.

Lisa tipped back her head and smiled.

"It is said that if you circle the mound seven times and spill your blood upon the peak, the Queen of the Fairies may appear and grant you a wish. I cannot guess how many young lads and lasses have pricked their fingers here. Old, tall tales—this land is full of them. Most likely some prior kin once emptied the chamber pots here. It would explain how thick and green the grass is." He dropped a kiss on her hair, wrapping his arms around her from behind. "I glimpsed you from the window and thought I might seek a word with you. How are you, lass?" he asked gently.

"Better," she said quietly. "I'm sorry. I didn't plan to stay in there for so long. I

just needed time to think. Until you'd given me the flask I still believed I might return. I needed time to come to terms with the reality of my situation."

"You need offer me no apology. It is I who should offer you one." He turned her to face him. "Lisa, I am sorry you were ensnared by my curse. I would like to say that I'm sorry you came here, but I must confess that I..."

Lisa glanced up at him searchingly.

He took a deep breath. "That I will devote my life to making it up to you. That I wish to wed you and will see you well cared for."

Lisa averted her gaze, mortified to feel tears threatening.

He stepped back, sensing that she was fighting for control. "That was all I wished to say, lass. I will leave you to your walk now. I merely wished to be certain you knew how I felt."

"Thank you," she said. As she watched him retreat, a part of her longed to summon him back, to make small, idle talk and while away the sunny afternoon, but tears still came too easily.

After he'd gone she continued strolling, drawn to explore her new home. She soaked up the warm fays, stopping periodically to examine small buds and unusual foliage. It occurred to her that since she was to stay there, she could finally do something she'd longed to do for years—she could have a puppy. She'd always wanted a dog but their apartment had been too small. When she returned to the castle, she would ask Circenn if he knew of any recent litters in the village.

As she approached the bothy, she realized she was going to survive. Her normal feelings were returning, her customary optimism, her desire to be involved in the world and to explore it. She wondered what a bothy actually was. A storehouse? A workshop? Turning the handle, she opened the door open and quietly stepped inside.

Duncan Douglas stood there, nude, his back to her. *My God*, she thought. Not Circenn, but certainly remarkable. Overwhelmingly curious about all things sensual, she was unable to look away. An equally unclothed maid was pressed between his body and the wall. The maid's cheek was flush to the wooden wall

and her palms were flattened against it above her head, with Duncan's strong hands covering them. His hips bucked against her, pushing into her from behind.

Lisa wet her lips and breathed softly. She knew she should slip out quietly before they realized they'd been observed.

In just a minute, she told herself, cheeks flaming. Her gaze dropped from his wide shoulders to his waist, over a muscled, tight ass that flexed as he pounded into her. Lisa couldn't move, assaulted by erotic images of Circenn doing the same to her.

"Oh, my heavens." She was so fascinated, the words escaped her before she could spare thought to prevent them.

They both turned to look at her at the same moment. The maid shrieked. The outrageous Duncan merely grinned. "Oops," he said nonchalantly.

Lisa fled the bothy.

At least now she knew what the ancients had used the outbuilding for.

Privacy.

* * *

The days passed quickly, in a haze of warm sunny mornings and afternoons spent with Duncan, who took her on tours of the castle and estate, and quiet evenings spent with Circenn over scrumptious dinners.

Circenn had been noticeably absent during the afternoons, neither training with his men nor present around the castle, and as they finished dessert that night she inquired about it.

"Come." He rose from the table and motioned for her to follow. "I have something for you, Lisa. I hope it pleases you."

She let him tuck her arm through his and guide her down a corridor she hadn't yet explored. It led to the end of the east wing, down winding and narrow stone hallways, through high arched doors, and up a circular stone staircase. He paused outside the door to a tower and removed a key from his sporran.

"I hope you doona think I have..." He blew out a sigh, looking uncomfortable.

"Lass, this seemed an excellent idea when I struck upon it, but now I have some concerns..."

"What?" she asked, perplexed.

"Have you ever come up with an idea that you think will make someone happy, then when it is time to give it to them you worry if perhaps you were wrong?"

"Did you make something for me?" she asked, recalling the flecks of wood dust she'd glimpsed him brushing off his tartan the day before.

"Aye," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "But it suddenly occurred to me that if I doona know you as well as I think I do, it may make you sad."

"Well, I'll just have to see it," she said, slipping the key from his hand.

Whatever he'd done, he'd pleased her simply by caring, and thinking about her, not to mention investing his time in labor with the intent to please her. Aside from her parents and Ruby, she'd received few impulsive gifts in her lifetime, and never one someone had fashioned by hand.

Curious, she inserted the key in the door, opened it, and stepped inside. Dozens of candles flickered, filling the room with a warm glow. The ceiling rose and met in a high wooden arch, and there were small benches strewn about. At the front of the room, before four beautifully colored windows, was a flat slab mounted on a thick base of stone—an altar. She realized he'd brought her to his private place of worship.

"Look down, lass," he said quietly.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. "Heavens, did you do this?" She glanced at Circenn, bewildered.

"I had a lot of idle time a few years past," he said with a shrug. *About thirty years*, he didn't add. Years during which he had thought he might go insane from loneliness, and so he'd buried his anguish in creating.

Her gaze flew back to the floor. It was an exquisite mosaic hand fashioned of wood, ranging out like a star from the center of the chapel. Light pine, dark walnut, and deep cherry interwove to create the patterns. Some of the pieces of

wood were no more than an inch in diameter. *It must have taken him years*, she thought, amazed. One man, designing this floor, carefully carving and sanding the pieces and laying them in a fabulous geometric pattern that would have made M. C. Escher wild with envy.

"Go up near the altar," he encouraged. "That is where I changed it."

Lisa walked gently across the floor, reluctant to mar it with her footsteps. In front of the altar, he'd torn up the old pattern and laid a new one. The area in front of the slab had been divided into two sections: to the right, painstakingly inlaid into the pattern in deep ebony was MORGANNA, BELOVED MOTHER OF CIRCENN. To her left, in the same black wood, was CATHERINE, BELOVED MOTHER OF LISA. There were no dates, an omission she understood, because they certainly wouldn't want anyone to see twenty-first-century dates in a medieval chapel. She could just imagine the heyday modern scholars would have had with that. The names were encircled by elaborate inlaid Celtic knot work.

Dropping to her knees, she ran her fingers over the freshly laid wood, her heart swelling with emotion. He'd placed her mother right next to his, clearly showing her she was half of his life. Now she could go there when she was missing her mother and feel as if she had a place to be near her.

It startled her, his keen insight. When Catherine had been diagnosed with cancer, Lisa had devoured "how to" books on dealing with the loss of a loved one, hoping to find some magic way of handling the impending loss of her mother. One of the things each book had addressed was that closure was a critical part of the healing process. In making this marker for her mother, Circenn had created a tangible and, by ancient social custom, innately comforting symbol of her absence, so that her absence became a soothing presence.

Lisa swallowed a lump in her throat and looked up. He was regarding her as if she were the most infinitely precious thing to him in the world.

"Was I a fool?" he worried.

"No. Circenn, I don't think you could ever be a fool," she said quietly. "Thank you. We do this in my time, too. And I will come here often to... to..." She trailed off, shaken by the depth of her emotion.

When he said, "Come," she moved easily into his arms.

CHAPTER 20

CIRCENN STALKED TO THE MIRROR AND STUDIED HIMSELF for the fifth time in as many minutes. He turned his face to the side and eyed his profile. He ran his hand over his shadow beard thoughtfully. Lisa's skin was very sensitive; perhaps he should shave more frequently.

But that wasn't the problem, he mused. Although she'd opened up considerably in the past few days, she retained a distance between them. She was healing, and it was time to complete the process. He needed to woo her into a closer intimacy, to help her fully accept her position as his soon-to-be wife.

Whom was he trying to deceive? He needed to bed her before he turned into a ravening beast. Not for a moment had he forgotten the vision he'd spied in his shield. And he wanted it, was eager to embrace his future. He'd been going excruciatingly slowly with her, allowing her time to heal. But she was changing again, becoming stronger.

He snorted, reflecting that she was not the only one who had undergone changes since her arrival. A few months ago he'd been a man of rigid discipline who despised many things about himself. Now he was a man of deep passion who welcomed what he might become—with her. A few months ago he'd eschewed physical intimacy, compiling dozens of reasons why it was logical to forswear it. Now he longed for physical intimacy, armed with dozens of reason why it was logical, arguably even necessary that he embrace it.

After he'd given her the chapel, he'd escorted her to her room, hoping to sweep her past a good-night kiss, but she'd been reticent. Her kiss had been stormy, and he'd plainly scented the desire in her body, but she'd been the one to stop the kiss, bidding him good sleep before leaving him at the door. He suspected that while she would allow herself to be somewhat happy, she was still not quite ready to believe that she shouldn't continue to suffer for sins she hadn't committed.

For her sake, he needed to be ruthless. He needed to penetrate her shell and ease her fully into his life. He wanted her, this fascinating woman with her deep emotions, her passionate heart, her witty and curious mind. He wanted her droll sense of humor, which had been noticeably absent of late. He needed her to

accept the deepest physical bond with him because he knew that once she did, she would bar no quarter of her heart from him. And he wanted to explore every private nook and cranny of her soul.

Ruthlessly seductive, that was what he would be.

He gathered his hair back into a thong and considered shaving, but was too impatient for her. They had retired from dinner a half-hour past, and with any luck she would be curled up in bed.

And he would join her. It was time.

Tonight he would make her his.

* * *

Lisa sipped her cider wine and watched the fire, feeling remarkably dissatisfied after finishing a delicious meal with a delicious companion and being given the lovely gift of the chapel. Her body was thrumming with frustration and she'd been having a perfectly vicious argument with herself.

Since she'd emerged from her chambers after her bout of grieving, Circenn had repeatedly given her every indication that he desired to enter a sexual relationship with her, but something was holding her back and she didn't have the faintest idea what it was. She'd studied it from every angle but still was no closer to understanding why she pulled away each time he tried to do more than kiss her. She hovered on the verge of asking him if *he* knew why she did, but couldn't bring herself to be quite so brutally honest.

A part of her wished he would try to storm her walls, so she could figure out what the damned walls were. She thought she'd decided to be happy here, but then why resist his seduction?

A knock at the door set her heart to pounding.

"Come in," she called softly, desperately hoping it would not be Gillendria who entered, carrying yet another restitched gown or surcoat.

"Lass," Circenn murmured, as he closed the door behind him.

Lisa sat up straight and placed her wine goblet on the table. *Don't say anything—*

just kiss me, she thought. Kiss me hard and fast and don't give me time to think.

"There was something I wanted to discuss with you, lass," he said. He crossed the room and pulled her up from the chair.

"Yes?"

He stopped and gazed down at her for a long moment. "Och, sometimes I make a fankle of things with words," he finally said. "I've been a warrior all my life, not a blethering bard." Cradling her head in his hands, he seized her mouth with his.

He buried his fingers in her hair, slipped his tongue between her lips with a smooth velvety stroke, kissing her slowly and thoroughly. He gave her a long, deliciously romantic kiss that left her clinging to him breathlessly. He nibbled her lower lip, sucking and tugging, then swept inside again, possessing her mouth. His hands slid down her back and over her bottom, and he groaned. He needed her desperately, but he also needed her to seek his affection. His tongue retreated and he paused, waiting for her to seek its return.

She didn't.

He sighed and moved back an inch to look at her. "At least fight me, lass, like you did when the Bruce declared us handfasted. Think you I've forgotten that? When I took my tongue from you then, you would have none of it."

Lisa averted her gaze.

Ruthless, Circenn reminded himself, or she will slip away from you. You cannot leave her trapped in grief and guilt.

When she moved to sit on the bed, he exhaled a small sigh of relief. The fact that she felt comfortable perching on the target of his seduction told him she wasn't entirely adverse to it.

"What are you waiting for, Lisa?" He sank next to her onto the bed. He was heartened that she didn't pull away but merely sat together, shoulder brushing shoulder. "Do you remember what you said to me the night that you arrived here, when you feared I might take your life?"

She glanced warily at him, indicating that she was listening.

"*I have not even lived yet.* Those are the words you said to me, and I heard many things in that statement. I heard frustration and regret. I heard curiosity and hunger for experiences, and a terrible fear that you would never get to have them. *I cannot die. I have not even lived yet!* you said to me. I thought you meant it. That given the chance you would live boldly."

Lisa flinched. She could feel the echo welling up inside her. It was true, she thought defiantly, she *hadn't* even lived yet. She felt a sudden flash of fury. She'd spent years denying herself the luxury of feelings, and with a few simple sentences, Circenn stripped them bare in front of her. She resented his psychoanalyzing her. It made her angry that he dared be so intimate with her feelings. Her eyes narrowed.

His lips curving in a faint, understanding smile, he said, "Go on, be angry with me, lass, for giving voice to the things you try not to feel. Be angry with me for saying aloud what you scarcely permit yourself to think—that a part of you resents your mother being ill because you cannot give yourself permission to live while she is dying. Be angry with me for saying that it tears you into little pieces, and that you feel you should suffer, because how could you not when your own mother lies dying? Be angry with me for demanding that you live now. Live with me. Fully."

Her hands clenched around wads of blanket. She couldn't deny anything he'd said. She *did* feel that she should suffer, since her mother was suffering. She *did* feel that every small smile she permitted herself was somehow a betrayal of Catherine. How dare Lisa smile when her mother was dying? What kind of monster could be happy for even an instant? Yet, she'd smiled occasionally, and even laughed, and then had hated herself for it. He was right on—this was what had been holding her back. An insidious little belief that she still had no right to be happy.

"Will you continue to punish yourself for sins not of your making? How much must you suffer before you feel you have paid in full? Would your lifetime be enough?"

Her lashes swept down, shielding her eyes.

"Would it be so wrong to plunge headlong into the love I offer you? Take—draw of life, suck it into your body, taste it with a vengeance."

"Damn you," she whispered.

"For saying what you think? Lass, I am the one you may say anything to. I assure you, I will understand. I doona care how ignoble you think your thoughts or feelings are. Feelings, emotions—they are neither right nor wrong. They cannot be assigned a value. Feelings *are*. By labeling a feeling wrong, you force yourself to ignore that feeling. And what you most need is to feel it, let it burn through you, then get on with life. You are not responsible for any of what happened to your parents. But to punish yourself for a having a feeling—och, lass, that is wrong. You felt some resentment—there is no shame in that. You are young and full of life—there is no shame in that."

Lisa looked as if she desperately wished to believe him.

"It wasn't your fault—not the wreck, not your mother getting ill, not your being brought here to me. Let go of it. Stand up, Lisa. Take what you want from me. Live now."

"Damn you," she repeated, shaking her head. Feelings long denied now flooded her.

She sat still, his words echoing in her mind. Then another voice startled her, because it sounded so like Catherine's, resounding in her head: *No more punishment. He's right,*

you know. Do you think I didn't see what you were doing to yourself? Live, Lisa.

Her hands were trembling. Could she? Did she know how? After years of refusing to believe that anything good might happen to her, could she reclaim the dreams she'd had of being a woman unafraid to love?

Her gaze swept over him. Magnificent Highlander, half savage, yet more civilized than most modern men. Tender, caring enough to penetrate her shell in a valiant effort to wrench her from it. She would never find a better man.

Live, she agreed.

Without a word, she rose to her feet, suffering the sensation that she was splitting into two different people. As if in the act of rising she slipped from her twenty-first-century body, leaving the old Lisa huddling on the bed, her arms wrapped

around a pillow, vehemently denying her own needs. This new Lisa stood tall and composed, waiting for—inviting—his next demand. Ready to make demands of her own.

"Remove your gown, Lisa."

Her breath clawed its way from her lungs.

"I said remove your gown."

"What about you?"

"This is not about me. This is about you. Let me love you, lass. I promise you will not regret it."

Lisa drew a shallow breath. He saw her heart as it really was, full of complicated and less-than-noble emotions, yet he wanted her. And in removing her gown she was dropping her barriers and extending her arms to welcome him. Welcoming what they could be together.

Her fingers felt stiff and clumsy as they moved over her clothing, but grew more nimble the more honest she was with herself.

"I want you. I am here for you. I adore you."

I adore you... His words lingered. And she acknowledged that she wanted it to be just like this. To disrobe for this man, to offer him her body, to find the approval and desire she knew he felt for her. To reach out and taste what he offered, to turn her willing body over to him to be taught, initiated, savored.

To live.

Her gown rustled to the floor.

"Stop!" He sat motionless, gazing at her as she stood, pale in the candlelight, in her lavender bra and panties. He made a sound low in his throat. Lisa had never heard a man make such a sound before, but she realized that she wanted to hear him make that sound many times, looking at her in just the same way.

"Proceed," he said finally, "verra slowly, lass. Kill me with it. You know I want you; use it. It is one of your many powers."

Lisa blinked, thrilled to realize that she had such power as a woman. His plaid was lifting, his chest was falling and rising rapidly, and his eyes were dark with desire. He was inviting her to wield her feminine strength, and she wanted to. In her fantasies she'd dreamed of just this: being with a man whose attraction to her was something she was so certain of that she could tease him, revel in her femininity, provoke and invite the consequences.

Slowly she began to strip away her lingerie, sliding the straps of her bra off her shoulders, tugging playfully, provocatively at the bow between her breasts. When his eyes flared, she slipped off her soft slippers and tossed one at him. The motion made her breasts sway gently. When the slipper hit him lightly in the chest, he swallowed hard and tensed to rise from the bed.

"No. I find I like this. You encouraged me. Let me discover who I am."

Circenn sank back to the bed, but looked ready to launch himself at her at any moment. A scrap of lace fluttered to the floor, then another, and Lisa stood before him holding her breath. She saw herself reflected in the polished mirror behind him and moved a bit to the right. *Perfect*, she thought: She could now see him fully clothed, his wide shoulders and muscled back, the bed, and herself standing nude before him. It was fiercely arousing, erotic, her desire strangely heightened by the fact that he was still completely dressed.

"Turn around."

"What?" she gasped, nearly losing her composure.

His laugh was a low purr. "You are perfection, lass. But turn around and show me all of your lovely body. I've been dreaming about you for weeks."

Lisa swallowed, uncertain that she could do it. She wouldn't be able to see him. What if he thought her behind was fat? *Men never think a behind is fat*, Ruby had told her once. *They're so happy just to be seeing it*.

"Come, lass. Show me if your back arches as I think it does—a cool sweep of ivory, with your hair tumbling down it. Show me that beautiful bottom. Show me those long lovely legs. Show me every inch of what I am going to kiss and taste."

His words were more than adequately persuasive; what woman could refuse

such a promise? Lisa drew a deep breath and turned. After a few moments of excruciating silence, she glanced nervously over her shoulder, seeking their reflection in the mirror. He had dropped to his knees by the bed and was crouched behind her, looking up and down, and up and down again.

Black eyes lifted to meet her gaze. The expression on his face was wild, possessive, and made her feel she was the most beautiful woman ever to stroll through his fourteenth-century world. He lunged to his feet and hauled her back against him, hard. The rough fabric of his plaid was arousing against her sensitive skin and she melted against his body. With a firm tug, he pulled her bare bottom against his hips, and she lost herself in the sensation of the fabric and the hard length of maleness that lay just beneath it. She pushed back, feeling the ridge of him pressing in the cleft of her behind. It jerked against her and she gasped with anticipation.

His hands slid up her waist, over her ribs, and he held her breasts reverently at first, then with rough excitement. Her nipples were already hard and aching from the cool air in the room, and when his fingers brushed them she nearly screamed. Her hips bucked back, and a flash of pleasure darted from her nipples to where she would take him into her body. He pinched them, and she felt her world spinning, narrowing down to nothing but her and him, and a desire to do everything with him that was possible between a man and a woman.

"That's it. Push back against me. Show me how you want me." He rocked against her, imitating the thrust and draw of lovemaking, and she felt the wetness between her thighs. Her movements became strained as wordlessly she begged for his body.

He wrapped an arm around her waist, bit the nape of her neck, catching the tendon between his teeth. It felt so... dominating. His other hand sought her lips, and he slipped his finger between them. She stroked it with her tongue, closing her lips over it and sucking it into her mouth.

Gently, he inched her toward the chest at the foot of the bed.

"Sit."

She sat breathlessly, so aroused that even the chest felt good to her aching bottom. Hard, that was what she wanted, something hard, and solid, and... *him*.

He stood before her, legs splayed, eyes dark. He brushed her nipples with his palms, his calluses deliciously abrasive against her sensitive peaks. She watched them tighten, fascinated by her body's responses to him. With his knee he nudged her legs apart slightly, seemingly transfixed by the small dark mole on the inside of her left thigh. He wet his lips, and she knew he would kiss her there many times.

Holding her gaze, he undressed for her, with excruciating leisure, never taking his eyes off her. No modern-day stripper could have competed with the performance he gave her. It had a funny effect on her emotions, that even though she was naked, even though he could have taken her quickly, he was making it as he'd promised: all about her. He was progressing slowly, feeding her every fantasy. He was still trying to woo her, despite the fact that he'd clearly already won her.

When he stood nude before her she closed her eyes, overwhelmed by him. She took a deep breath and opened them again, only to discover him bobbing before her. *It's beautiful*, she thought. She'd never realized that a man could be so beautiful. The hard bulges in his abdomen tapered into lean muscles that rippled down to his thighs, creating a vee of taut ridges that commanded attention to the raw masculinity that hung heavily between his legs. The mere sight of him made her stomach feel tight and empty. It was thick and long and raising itself eagerly. Olive-pink, smooth, velvety-looking, hooded, with a strong vein running the length of it. It would be warm—no, it would feel hot and silky beneath her hand.

Leaning closer for a better look, she was startled when it bobbed again and brushed her cheek. Laughing, she looked up at him, and lost her breath.

He stared down at her transfixed, his expression so possessive that she gasped. She would never be the same after this night. *Be bold*, she told herself. *Be brave and wanton and everything you always fantasized about being. Take from life, Lisa.*

She wrapped her hand around him, and, as she'd suspected, her fingers couldn't close. A shiver shot through her, imagining her body yielding to take so much of him. He bucked within her grip. A smile curved her lips. She could do that to him, make him jerk hungrily in response to her touch. She squeezed, sliding her hand up and down.

This part of him was such a contradiction: so hard, yet the skin so very soft and sensitive, so strong, yet so weak before a woman, so easily wielded by a man as a weapon, yet so easily used as a weapon against him. Lisa licked her lips, wondering how he tasted. Salty? Sweet? Where was her whipped cream? She dropped her head and brushed her lips over the tip of him. Just once, a tight suction with her lips, the quick flick of a tongue, just enough to taste him and assuage her curiosity.

A bit salty, and a scent of spicy man, she thought, pondering the flavor on her tongue, her hand momentarily still. His spicy scent that numbed her brain was more prevalent here, near the center of his manhood. It did alarming things to her—both relaxed and stimulated her. She glanced up, wondering why he'd gone motionless, and was stunned by the startled, savage look on his face.

He drew her up into his arms, swept her back onto the bed, and stretched himself on top of her. "Lass, I am going to love you until you cannot walk from my bed," he whispered, before kissing her.

She responded eagerly, fiercely, molding her mouth to his.

"Slowly first." He drew back slightly. With excruciating gentleness he brushed his lips against her, once, twice, a dozen times. She parted her lips against his gentle friction, signifying her desire for more. He laughed softly and ran the tip of his tongue in a playful circle over her lips. He teased until she was moving frantically, trying to catch his tongue with hers.

"Place your hands above your head, lass, and if you have a problem keeping them there I will be happy to use fabric to secure them," he murmured.

"What? Do you want to tie me up?" she exclaimed, mildly shocked. She felt his lips curve in a smile against hers; he was amused by her reaction.

"I would not be adverse to the idea." His laughter was husky, darkly erotic. "But for now, I merely wish you to restrain your hands from my body. You need give nothing, do nothing; I assure you, I'll be taking my pleasure in the giving."

Lie back and let me pleasure you, he was saying. *Have I died and gone to heaven?* she wondered. *And he prefers to do this?* Her fantasy lovers had always been dominant and demanding illusions who exhausted themselves in bed,

giving their woman pleasure. Obediently, she raised her hands above her head. The movement lifted her breasts, and he caught one roughly with his mouth.

Then she was burning, her nipples were on fire. He nipped and tongued, licked and tugged until her breasts felt swollen and hot. He raised them together and dragged his tongue down the soft crevice, then he separated them and kissed each nipple. He nipped her stomach and kissed her hips—the very sensitive part where her leg met her upper body, only inches from the soft hair between her thighs. The skin was thinner there, more delicate. He pressed hot kisses to the tiny mole inside her thigh, dragged his velvety tongue over it, and she arched against him, instinctively guiding him closer to her center.

His tongue flicked out to taste her and her hands flew down to cradle his head between her legs as she arched against him. He tasted her with long, smooth strokes against the sensitive nub, alternately fast, then languid, then fast again. "Oh, God!" She embraced the pleasure. She soared, spiraled, shuddered, and when she fell he was there to catch her, with promise in his eyes.

He slipped a finger inside her and she contracted helplessly around it. She realized that there was an entirely different sensation she'd not yet experienced. She'd heard that orgasms could be very different when a man was inside a woman, as opposed to an orgasm from external sensation. She could feel just the hint, the promise of the fullness it would offer.

"Tight. Too tight, lass. You need to be more relaxed, and I know of only one way to accomplish that." His lips burned against her skin as he kissed her mole, tongued it, then stroked his velvety kisses down to her ankles, her toes, and back up with delicious slowness. And when he returned, he lowered his head and ensured that she was completely relaxed by sending her over the edge again.

Two fingers.

The fullness!

Three. "Relax, lass. I doona wish to hurt you overmuch. I am—"

"I know," she panted. "You are. I saw you." She was awed and a little afraid.

His hands were magic, her body eased open, only to contract swiftly when he removed his fingers. *The ache, oh, the unbearable ache.*

"Please," she groaned.

He raised himself above her and positioned himself between her legs. But he didn't enter—nay, he took her lips with his and kissed her: light and teasing, kissed her deeply; kissed her so hard that his teeth bumped against hers, which she'd always thought might seem clumsy but it wasn't, it made her nearly wild beneath him. She arched her lower body, pressing against that hot male part of him, and he pressed back against her, hard.

"In me," she cried.

He laughed against her lips. "Impatient lass."

"Yes I am. In me."

"Aye aye, mistress," he whispered.

He gave it to her slowly. The first inch was a most unusual sensation and she doubted she could take him. The second inch promised pain. The third and fourth *were* painful, but the seventh and eighth promised heaven. Lisa closed her eyes and devoted her full attention to the hard man inside her. She had never felt such a pressure, such a completing sensation in her life. She could have stayed like that forever.

And then he rocked slowly within her. "Squeeze me," he whispered.

"What?"

"With your muscles." When she stared at him blankly, he tickled her suddenly, causing her to laugh. The muscles inside her contracted and she understood.

"Squeeze like that, you mean?"

He went completely still inside her. "Squeeze."

It was the most incredible sensation. She could use her woman's muscles to contract on him and release, and every time she contracted around him it sent her perilously close to the edge. He lay motionless atop her, letting her feel him, grow used to him, develop an insatiable hunger for the pleasure of him buried within her.

"Does it arouse you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she murmured.

He withdrew slowly, savoring every sweet contraction of her muscles, then filled her to the mouth of her womb.

The night was young, and over the course of it he made a wee bit of progress down his endless list of things he wanted to do with her. Her insatiable curiosity extended into the bedchamber, as he had hoped it would. She was a most willing conspirator throughout the long night of passion-slicked bodies and yielding hearts.

When he rose, bracing his hands wide on the bed to either side of her, threw back his head and lost a part of himself deep within her, he nearly doubled over in agony. His muscles wrenched tightly in his abdomen, his heart pounded alarmingly, and his head felt it might split. In all his life, he had never permitted himself to spill inside a woman, refusing to have children. First because he'd not been ready, then because of what Adam had done to him.

But he'd laid his fears aside, and this time he let go. And at the precise moment he filled her, he felt a bond flare into life between the two of them, as if a channel had been cut between their souls, allowing a bit of her to seep into him, and a bit of him into her. It burned through his body, tunneling to the part of his mind that held magic. It was like a blinding white heat that roared inside him and exploded in a flash of heightened awareness.

It was the most incredible sensation he had ever experienced.

Suddenly he could feel *her* pleasure, could even sense that she felt grateful to him for helping her forget her pain and making her first time such an incredible experience.

Hmm, he thought, liking this new bond. *He had exceeded her expectations for lovemaking.* His gaze flew to hers and he saw that it had been the same for her. But she didn't know, because this was her first and only time of physical intimacy, that such an awareness of each other was *not* a normal result of lovemaking. Her eyes were huge and filled with wonder.

He didn't understand what had transpired in the creation of their strange bond,

and he wondered what lasting effects it might have on her. He wondered if perhaps the immortality potion had changed him, so that if he spilled seed into a woman's body they became linked. There was much he did not understand about himself.

And then he wondered no more, but cradled her in his arms and felt at peace for the first time in centuries.

* * *

Afterward, Lisa lay with her cheek pressed to Circenn's chest, one of his strong arms curled around her waist, wondering at the God who had seen fit to take so much from her, yet give her this incredible man. She'd never known that lovemaking would make her so much more aware of his feelings. It was as if someone had flipped a switch inside her: A dazzling white heat filled her, and suddenly she was able to sense his emotions; even now he was worrying for her, wondering if he'd pleased her. It was a strange awareness, a pressure that he was near, surrounding her; she'd never before felt so linked to anyone, not even her mother, who'd carried her inside her body.

She vowed to plunge headlong into all the pleasure she could find with Circenn, because one never knew how long anything might last. He could be crushed under a rock while building an addition on his castle; he could be injured in many ways; he might be wounded in battle—oh! It was June, she realized, and the mighty battle at Bannockburn was just weeks away.

He couldn't go; that was all there was to it. She could not let him go to war. The way her luck ran, she would get a few blissful weeks with him, then he would be killed in battle and there she'd be in the fourteenth century all by herself. Her fingers clenched around his hand.

"I will not die, lass," he whispered against her hair.

"Can you read minds too, in addition to cursing things?" she asked, startled.

"Nay. But you were feeling it rather loudly. I know what you fear. You fear being abandoned. When your hand tensed on mine I surmised where your fears had gone. That I might die too young, as your father did." He acted as if their new bond was nothing out of the ordinary. It was easier for her to accept because, being untried, she didn't know it wasn't the customary result of tugging.

"But you could die," she said. "There's a war going on—"

"Shh." He drew her close and rolled from his back to his side, so they lay facing each other, their heads sharing a pillow, their noses touching. "I swear to you that I will not die. Do you trust me, lass?"

"Yes. But I don't understand. How could anyone possibly swear that they won't die? Even you can't control that."

"Trust me. Have no fear for me, Lisa. It would be wasted fear. Let's just say my unique abilities include the knowledge of when I will die, and it will not be for a very long time."

She was silent, and he felt a shiver run through her.

He knew she was hearing more than his words, was feeling his intent behind them. They had a new awareness of each other that transcended words, as if their souls had become entangled. Via that bond, she was comforted, sensing truth in his words, although she didn't understand the how or why of it. He held her, reveling in their strange tie. He sensed the moment at which she relinquished her fears and relaxed, not merely because she wet her lip and glanced at him provocatively.

And what he felt next needed no words.

CHAPTER 21

ADAM SIFTED THE GRAINS OF TIME AND DARTED through them to the isle of Morar. He would relax there for a day or so, ponder the developments, study the potentials, and determine where his gentle nudging might be required. Things were progressing well, and he had no intention of losing what he'd thus far gained. He'd experienced a bit of concern during the time she'd remained in her chambers, grieving, but she had indeed been as strong as he'd suspected, emerging ready for love.

And how lovely she'd been in her bath, he reflected with a smile.

As his feet hit the beach, he willed his clothing gone, then he strolled languidly, burying his toes deep in the wet, silky-warm sand. Once, he'd walked on a California beach, nude in the full glory of his true form. Thousands of Californians had been stricken by high fevers that had erupted in public displays of eroticism.

He loved being Adam.

The sun beat down upon his muscled chest, a tropical breeze licked his dark hair. He was a pagan god, savoring his world—there was no better place to be.

Most of the time.

In the bay, a ship sailed past. Adam grinned and waved. The pitiful occupants of the ship could no more see the island than they could fly to the stars. The exotic isle simply didn't exist, in the usual sense of the word. But fairy isles were like that—in the mortal world, but not of the mortal world. Occasionally, a mortal was born who could see both worlds, but those creatures were rare, and usually stolen quickly after birth by the *Tuatha de Danaan*, to minimize the risk. Ever since Manannan had given his people the drink of immortality and the Compact had been negotiated, the *Tuatha de Danaan* had been exceedingly cautious when treading in the world of man.

Still, Adam thought, there were times when even a demigod such as himself couldn't resist. There was something about the world of man that fascinated him, made him think he had perhaps once been more similar to them than he could

clearly recall, his memories dimmed by time's passage.

"In what merriment have you been indulging?" Aoibheal, Queen of the Fairies, purred behind him.

She joined him, her long, beautiful legs keeping pace with his, and guided him toward a crimson chaise that conveniently appeared before them. She sank into it and patted the cushions, indicating that he should join her. She glistened, sprinkled in gold dust as was her custom. Were he to run his finger down her, it would come away glittering with fine gold powder. He had long suspected the dust contained an aphrodisiac that penetrated the skin of those who touched her, rendering them powerless to refuse her.

When she beckoned him intimately near, he masked his astonishment. It had been an eternity since his queen had invited him to share her pillowed haven. What was she up to? As he sank down beside her, she molded her body against his. He exhaled a low rush of breath, the equivalent of a human shiver. She was the Queen of the *Tuatha de Danaan* for a reason: Her power was enormous, her allure immense. She was erotic, and many found her frightening; a mere mortal could lose his life in her arms, drained by her appetites. Even among Adam's kind, males had walked away from her boudoir changed.

"Naught to worry, my Queen, I have been but passing idle time with Circenn." Unable to resist, he kissed a golden nipple, dragging his tongue across the peak.

Aoibheal watched him, her unusual eyes bright, her head propped upon a delicate fist. She fisted her other hand in his hair and lifted his head from her breast. Her exotically slanted eyes were ancient in her ageless face. "Think you I know not of the woman?" she said. "You've done it again. How far do you think you may push our limits?"

"I did not bring her through time. It was not my doing. Circenn cursed something, and, as a result, the woman was brought back to his century."

"I see." She stretched her long, slim body languidly, sweeping the curve of her breasts against him. "Please remind me, I seem to be forgetting—who was it that taught Circenn Brodie how to curse things in the first place?"

Adam acknowledged his guilt with silence.

"Assure me, fool mine, that you had nothing to do with precisely when and where that cursed object was found. You did not perhaps nudge it a bit in one direction?"

"I no more nudged the object than arranged the battle in which it was lost."

She laughed softly. "Ah, another Adam-ism—that which confesses nothing while arrogantly concealing nothing. I have seen her. I went to Brodie and inspected her. I find her quite... interesting."

"Leave her alone," Adam snapped.

"So you do have an interest in this, although you conveniently blame it on that Scot laird." She cocked her head and regarded him coolly. "You will not interfere again. I know you've been visiting her in another guise. Eirren will pay her court no more. No." She raised a hand when he would have protested. "Amadan Dubh, I compel you thusly: You will leave neither my side nor the isle of Morar unless I grant you permission."

Adam hissed. "How dare you!"

"I dare anything. I am your Queen, though you seem to forget it from time to time. You pay clever tithes to my supremacy with your lips, but you defy me over and again. You have gone too far. You broke one of our most serious covenants with Circenn Brodie, and now you dare to compound it. I will not tolerate it."

"You are jealous," Adam said cruelly. "You resent my attachment—"

"It is unnatural!" Aoibheal hissed. "You should have no such attachment! It is not our way!"

"It was done long ago and cannot be undone. Do not think to constrain me. I will only find a way around it."

Aoibheal arched a gilded brow. "I think not, Amadan, for you are at my side until I release you. My command was clear. Ponder it. There is no weak spot for you to exploit."

In his mind, Adam sorted through her words. Her command had been simple,

direct, and flawless. His eyes widened as he comprehended how completely she had snared him with so few words. Most who tried to command him composed lengthy written canons, like that boorish Sidheach Douglas at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea, who'd written a veritable book. But sometimes, less was truly more, and she had chosen her words well. He could leave neither her nor the island unless and until she said so. "But they will sully my creation."

"I care not. From this moment on, you are powerless in their lives. Amadan Dubh: I take from you the gift of sifting time."

"Stop!"

"Obey me and cease your tiresome protests."

"You *bitch*."

"For that I take from you your ability to weave worlds."

Adam fell silent, his face ashen. The Queen could strip everything from him, if she so desired.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked silkily.

Adam nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Good. When it is done, I will release you. When they have played out their choices. Now come, lovely fool: Show me you still know how to please a Queen, and make it your finest effort, for you have offended me most egregiously and I shall require much in the way of... *mmm*"

* * *

Robert the Bruce was fuming. The travel-stained, weary messenger who stood before him shuffled miserably, awaiting the fatal blow. He eyed the Bruce's sword, knowing that the moment his king pulled it from its scabbard, he would likely lose his courage and dignity and beg or, worse, run.

"What was my brother *thinking*?"

"I doona know that he was," the messenger replied dejectedly. "They were well besotted with whisky."

"Had he been drinking with the English again?" Robert's lips curled in a sneer.

The messenger nodded, afraid to speak.

"How dare he be the one to determine the time and place for my battles?" Robert thundered. He couldn't believe what the messenger had imparted: His brother Edward, who was in charge of the siege against Stirling Castle, which was being held by the English, had made a "wager" with the Englishman holding it. A wager! A drink-induced challenge, and booty far more valuable than Stirling itself was the prize.

An admission of defeat was the prize, a full retreat from the battle for the crown. Robert could nearly feel his kingdom slipping from his tenuous grasp. His men weren't yet ready for this battle. He needed more time.

"You may be underestimating your men," Niall McIlloch said. "I know it often seems the present is not the right time, but perhaps it is."

Robert shot him a furious glance. "Exactly what were the words exchanged?" he demanded of the ashen messenger.

The messenger winced and glanced around the dim interior of the Brace's tent, seeking help. No one came to his aid. Two blue-eyed Berserkers watched his every move from the shadows—as if that wasn't enough to make a man collapse in a puddle of fear! He sighed, resigned to further infuriating his king.

"Sir Philip de Mowbray, the current commander of the English forces at Stirling, wagered with your brother thusly: If a relieving English army does not approach to within three miles of Stirling Castle by Midsummer's Day, he will surrender the castle to you and your brother and leave Scotland, never to return. If the relieving army successfully attains Stirling, you will give up your fight for Scotland's independence."

"And my dim-witted brother Edward accepted this?" Robert roared.

"Aye."

Robert shook his head. "Does he not realize what this means? Does he not realize that King Edward will gather every troop he has—English, Welsh, Irish, French, supported by every mercenary he can hire—and drive them into my land

in less than two weeks' time?"

No one breathed in the tent.

"Does my idiot brother not realize that England has triple our mounted men, quadruple our spearmen and archers?"

"But they're *our* hills and valleys," Niall reminded softly. "We know this land. We know what advantages to exploit, and doona forget, we have Brodie and his Templars. We have the gentle mists and bogs. We can do this, Robert. We've been fighting for years for our freedom and we have yet attained no decisive victory. It is time now. Doona underestimate the men who follow you. We have two weeks to rally the forces. Believe in us as we have believed in you."

Robert drew a deep breath and pondered Niall's words. *Had* he been too cautious? Had he been willing to fight only small battles because it wouldn't be such a terrible loss if they failed? Had he unwisely restrained his men from a major war because he feared the possibility of defeat? Circenn had been impatient to war. His Berserkers were impatient to war, aye—and his own impatient brother had wagered their future. Perhaps they were all impatient because it was time.

"Let us summon Brodie. This is what you've been waiting for," Niall said firmly.

"Aye, milord," said Lulach, Niall's brother. "If we prevent Edward's army from reaching Stirling, we will have turned the tides. We will be unstoppable, and if ever the time was now, the time is now. Plantagenet grows weaker in his own country; many of his own lords will not follow him into our land. I say we face this wager boldly, as a gift of fate."

Robert nodded finally. To the messenger, he said, "Get you to Castle Brodie with all haste. Command Circenn to bring his men to join us at St. Ninian's Church by the Roman road. Tell him time is of the essence and to bring every weapon he possesses."

The messenger expelled a relieved breath and fled the tent for Inverness.

* * *

Lisa and Circenn explored each other with uninhibited joy, withdrawing completely into a world of their own making. Circenn laughed more than he had

in centuries. Lisa talked more, voicing thoughts and feelings she hadn't even suspected lay dormant within her. In this way they rediscovered themselves, opening up closed compartments that needed the light of day.

The two of them roamed the estate, picnicking in the fresh spring air, dashing off to the bothy for a private moment. It was there that Lisa confided to Circenn what she'd seen Duncan doing with Alesone.

"Did you look?" He scowled possessively. "Did you see him entirely in the blush?"

"Yes." Lisa's cheeks heated.

"I doona care for that thought. You will not look upon another man unclothed for the rest of your life."

Lisa laughed. He sounded so thoroughly medieval. "He didn't look as good as you."

"I still doona care. It makes me angry with Duncan merely for being a man."

Then he erased her memory of the young, virile Douglas, against the wall in the bothy.

Twice.

They spent long nights in his bed, in her bed, on the stairs late one night when the Greathall was deserted. She told him about her life, and slowly, haltingly, he began to tell her of his. But there she sensed he was holding something back. Because of their odd connection, she could feel a darkness in him that waxed and waned without explanation. Sometimes, when he watched the children playing outside in the courtyard, he grew silent, and she could feel that peculiar mixture of anguish and anger that she simply didn't understand.

The castle staff was delighted with the laird's newfound laughter, and Duncan and Galan beamed when they dined together. Gone were the private seduction dinners—Circenn saved that for later in the privacy of their chambers. Meals were now taken not in the formal dining hall but in the Greathall, with an assortment of knights and the occasional Templar.

Lisa was slowly and irresistibly becoming fourteenth-century. She learned to love the flowing gowns and tartans, even sitting with some of the women, watching them dye the fibers and fashion the Brodie weave.

She loved the fact that people sat about the hearth and talked in the evening, rather than retreating to their individual electronic worlds of television, phones, and computer games. They possessed richly detailed oral histories and were eager to share them. Duncan and Galan knew their clan history centuries back and wove grand tales of the many Douglas heroes. Lisa listened and sorted through her own genealogy, looking for a Stone to speak of, but who cared if one's uncle was a lawyer? Could he chop wood and carry water?

Blissfully the days and nights unfurled, and Lisa realized that she now understood why her mother had lost the will to live when Jack died. If her mom had felt a tenth of what Lisa felt for Circenn, it would have been devastating for Catherine to lose her husband. And her mother had lost so much in one day—her love, her ability to walk, her entire way of life. Lisa attained a new respect for her mother's strength, only now understanding the extent of her mother's loss and the pain it must have caused her to continue living without Jack.

Circenn's strength and love were always curled around her like a protective cloak. She couldn't imagine how she'd lived before without it. The link between them kept her constantly aware of him, no matter where he was. It was never invasive, but she'd discovered—feeling a need for complete privacy while using the chamber pot—that it could be dimmed if she wished. She would never be lonely again. Sometimes, when he was far away, riding with his men, something would amuse him and she would sense his rich laughter rolling inside her, although she would have no idea what had made him laugh.

At other times she would feel his frustration while he was off with his knights, and without even knowing what he was angry about, she would be flooded by his raw masculinity that roared to wield a battle-ax and actively protect his homeland. Via their bond, she experienced masculine emotions and drives she'd never understood before, and was fascinated by the knowledge that he was feeling her more tender, womanly ones.

It wasn't until she asked him if he knew of a puppy she might adopt that she choked on a deep, bitter swallow of the blackness inside him.

They were sitting on the stone bench by the reflecting pool—it had become a favorite spot of theirs—watching some children tossing a bladder ball in the courtyard. A small mutt had plunged into the melee and grabbed the ball between his sharp teeth, and when it had burst against his whiskers, he'd shot straight up into the air, yipping frantically, comically trying to scrape the remains of the skin off his nose. While the children had giggled helplessly, Lisa had laughed until tears sparkled in her eyes.

"I want a puppy," she said, when her amusement subsided. "I've always wanted one, but our apartment was too small and—"

"No."

Perplexed, her smile faded. A wave of sorrow engulfed her, radiating from him. It cloaked her *in* a deep sense of futility. "Why?"

He brooded, staring at the yapping mutt. "Why would you want a puppy? They doona live long, you know."

"Yes, they do. They can live ten to fifteen years, depending on the breed."

"Ten to fifteen years. Then they die."

"Yes," Lisa agreed, unable to fathom his resistance. Another wave of darkness and anger surged around her. "Did you have a puppy once?"

"No. Come. Let us walk." He rose and extended his hand. Guiding her away from the playing children, he led her into a thick copse.

"But, Circenn, I don't mind that a puppy will die. At least I get to love it for the time I have with it."

He pushed her back against a tree and covered her mouth with his, savagely.

Her breath came out in a soft *humph*, as he crushed her between his body and the tree. She was smothered in his emotions: pain, hopelessness, and hunger tinged by a savage need to possess her completely, to brand her with his body. And something more, something that danced tantalizingly out of her reach.

"Mine," he whispered against her lips.

"What a totally barbaric"—she drew a deep breath beneath the onslaught of his lips—"medieval, arrogant, warlord thing to say."

"And true. You are mine." He dragged his tongue across her lower lip, tasting, suckling. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips. He crowded her against the tree, pressing her into it. His blackness charged the air between them and infiltrated her, drenching her with his tension. He raised her skirts and slipped his hand up her thigh, abruptly burying his finger inside her. "You are wet, lass," he said roughly. "Dripping for me yet I've scarce kissed you. I like knowing you walk around ready for me."

He turned her around to face the tree. He shoved his tartan aside and pushed the folds of her gown out of his way, trapping the fabric between her body and the bark. He cupped her exposed curves, spreading and opening her for him. His breathing was harsh, and she gasped when she felt him heavy and swollen between her buttocks. Then suddenly he thrust into her.

He was too big from behind. Lisa tried to push him away with her hips, but he pushed back relentlessly.

She grabbed the tree with her hands, confused by the intensity of his emotions, doubly confused because she was caught up in the maelstrom of his fury. It imbued her with an unidentifiable rage that had no object she could discern, translating into a fierce need to possess, to dominate, to take even that which would, under other circumstances, be willingly given. The only release for the anger was in the taking.

His rage consumed her, and she bucked back against him and turned, forcing him from her body. She rammed the heels of her palms against his chest.

"I don't understand you," she snapped, her eyes flashing. Still, his intense darkness seeped inside her, driving her, goading her to release it somehow.

His eyes were dark, unfathomable pools, and danger radiated from him. He shoved her back against the tree.

She knocked his hands from her shoulders with a swift outward thrust of both arms. "Oh no. You said I get to be in control, too. Don't think I've forgotten. You do what *I* want this time."

"And what do you want, Lisa?" he asked, his voice dangerously soft.

She grabbed his plaid and ripped it from his body. She dropped it to the ground, spreading it with the toe of her slipper. "Lie down," she demanded, his strange darkness fueling her.

He complied, his eyes glittering. Although he'd honored her demand, he was by no means subdued. He was dangerous and deadly, but she didn't care one bit, because his emotions made her feel every bit as lethal.

She dropped on top of him and kissed him with all his frustrated rage. She became a wild thing, uncaring that she filled the air with sounds of passion. Her hands cupped his face and she kissed him deeply, tonguing his mouth, nibbling his lips, shifting her hips so she was astride him. The movement with which she claimed him inside her body was not a gentle one. Their eyes met and locked, and she imagined sparks flying from the sheer heat of it.

She felt like a Valkyrie, demanding satisfaction from her mate. His hands swept up and closed over her breasts, his gaze fixed on the mole inside her left thigh. She rocked herself on him, raising and lowering her hips again and again, her palms flush to his chest, bracing herself, watching the area where their bodies were joined by his thick shaft. He reared up hungrily, suckling her nipples as her breasts swayed above him, his hips thrusting urgently. When he exploded inside her, savage satisfaction flooded her and she nearly swooned from the intensity of both their emotions. It was overwhelming, and pushed her swiftly past the edge. She arched her neck and cried out.

Afterward, she lay on his chest, wondering what had just happened. Had she taken him with his desire, or had he taken her with hers? It was so confusing, so mind paralyzing, their strange bond. When their passions were high and their bodies sweat-slicked against each other, she truly couldn't see where he began and she ended, because she felt it all. It heightened her pleasure a hundredfold.

"What just happened?" she whispered.

"I think we demonstrated the true extent of our need for each other, lass," he said softly, stroking her hair. "Sometimes need can be a violent thing."

"But what was all the darkness I was getting from you?" she pressed.

"What did it feel like, lass?" he asked carefully.

"Like you were furious with something or someone, and almost like you thought I wouldn't be here tomorrow."

He sighed against her hair. His arms tightened around her and she felt his throat work as he swallowed. "Time is too short, love. That's all you felt. That no matter how long I might have with you, it would never be enough."

"We have a whole lifetime, Circenn," she reassured him, kissing him. "You have all of my life."

"I know," he said sadly. "I know. All of yours."

"There's something you're not saying, Circenn."

"It's still not enough," he replied. "I begin to fear that only forever will satisfy me."

"Then I'm yours forever," she said easily.

"Be careful what you promise, lass." His eyes were dark. "I may hold you to it."

Lisa pressed her cheek against his chest, weary from the outburst of emotion and confused by his strange words. She sensed some dark threat there that she wasn't certain she wished to understand.

* * *

"Tell me everything about your life, lass," he demanded later, as they lay in his bed. He shifted inside her and rocked.

"Everything?" Her breathing was rapid and shallow. *God, but he knew how to touch her.* She had never understood being touched, until this Highlander had placed his hands on her body.

"Everything. Did you ever know a woman's pleasure before I made you mine?"

"Do you mean did I ever have an orgasm? That's what we call them in my time. A climax or an orgasm."

"Aye. Did you?"

Lisa blushed. "Yes," she said softly. His fingers tensed on her hips, and he buried his face in her thighs, lapping gently.

"When?" he growled. The vibration was exquisite.

"This is really rather personal," she protested weakly, arching against him.

"Yes, 'this is really rather personal,' " he mocked. "And you think to withhold mere words when I'm doing this to you?"

"I was curious. I... touched myself a time or two."

"And?"

"And I found a most unusual sensation. So I bought a book that explained it all."

"And?"

"And what?" she said, feeling embarrassed.

"Did it feel like this?" He slipped a finger inside her.

"Nothing feels like you," she whispered, arching against his hand.

"Did you touch yourself like this?" He drew back so she could see him. One hand palmed her mound, the heel of it exerting gentle friction; the other he wrapped around himself.

She lost her breath, mesmerized by the sight of his hand holding his heavy shaft. Jealous of his hand being where hers longed to be. She reached out and knocked his hand away and he laughed.

"Mine," she said roughly.

"Ah, yes."

* * *

Later he began again. "Tell me everything about your life. Tell me about the wreck and what's wrong with your mother and what you missed and what you longed for." He quickly tried to mask his feelings, ashamed of what he was thinking. He must have been successful at hiding his emotions, for she confided readily, teaching him many new words as they went along.

A dangerous thought had formed in the back of his mind, and he pressed against it, trying to force it into submission.

But he knew well the danger of seeds once sown.

CHAPTER 22

"GALAN, WE'VE DONE IT," DUNCAN SAID SMUGLY. THE two brothers were leaning against a stone column near the entrance of the Greathall, observing the revelry. Circenn was teaching Lisa one of their less complicated Highland dances. Engrossed in watching her feet, every few moments she tossed back her head and laughed at him. She was adorable, Duncan decided.

The villagers had finally gotten their feast, thanks to Galan, Duncan, and the enthusiastic castle staff who had planned it without awaiting further input or permission. While Circenn and Lisa had wandered about, oblivious and infatuated, the residents of Castle Brodie had finalized the plans, simply informing the couple when the celebration would be. The laird's blossoming romance with his lady had infused the estate with good humor.

Duncan conceded that they'd done an astonishing job; the staff had devoted loving care to transforming Castle Brodie for the festivities. Brilliantly lit by hundreds of rushlights, the hall was warm, the atmosphere most conducive to romance. Rippling banners of crimson and black Brodie tartan decked the walls. Thirty long tables formed a rectangle around the room, each laden with a sumptuous feast. The musicians gathered behind the laird's table at the head of the hall, while in the center of the rectangle, on the floor cleared for dancing, couples, children, even an occasional wolfhound indulged the fierce Scot penchant for celebrating. In such a war-torn land, any cause was reason to feast as if there was no tomorrow, because there might not be. The musicians were playing a sprightly, edgy tune and the dancers faced the challenge with relish. As feet flew, the tempo increased, and ripples of laughter broke out as they kept pace with the frenetic beat.

"Look at them," Galan said softly.

Duncan didn't have to ask whom he meant; Galan's eyes were fixed on Lisa and Circenn, as were many other eyes in the room. The laird and his lady were clearly in their own universe, absorbed in each other.

Duncan had heard the strange note in Galan's voice and now gazed at him sharply, seeing his older brother in a new light.

"They are so in love." Galan sounded weary, and longing infused his voice.

Duncan frowned, confounded by a new and uncomfortable sensation—as if he were the older brother and should take care of Galan. It occurred to him that Galan was thirty years old and had single-mindedly devoted the past ten years of his life to warring for Scotland's independence. That didn't leave much time for a disciplined warrior to taste the comforts of family and home life. How had he failed to see that Galan, in the midst of all the warriors and the fighting and the splendid wenching to be had, was lonely?

"Wasn't there a lass in Edinburgh you visited when last we were there?" Duncan asked.

Galan glowered. "Doona try to finagle a match for me, little brother. I'm fine."

Duncan lifted a brow. How often had Galan assured him that he was fine, and Duncan had gone about his merry way, leaving him alone? Bewildered by his new insight, he uneasily filed the subject away for future consideration. His brother needed a woman, but not in the way Duncan needed a woman; Galan needed a wife.

"Think you they will have children?" Duncan changed the subject, noting Galan relax visibly when he did so.

"Bah! If they haven't already conceived one. I hear they have taken over one of your favored tugging spots."

"My bothy?" Duncan exclaimed indignantly. "A man can't have any privacy."

Neither brother spoke for a time, each absorbed in his own thoughts. The musicians commenced a slow, haunting ballad and the dancers moved into more intimate embraces.

Suddenly Galan said, "Och, by Dagda—look yonder, Duncan. Who is that stunning lass?" He pointed across the hall. "Too lovely for me, that's for certain."

Duncan glanced swiftly where Galan pointed, his body tightening with anticipation. *Too lovely for me* was the slap of an irresistible gauntlet to Duncan. He adored such words, his innate maleness rose to them aggressively; he'd long been restless and ready for something different.

"Where? I see no one of note." Duncan craned his neck to peer through the crowd. When the dancers parted for a moment, he glimpsed a mane of shimmering red hair. He sucked in a breath. "The redhead. Is she the one you meant? You know what they say—fire on top, fiery tup."

Galan punched him in the arm. "Is that *all* you ever think about? There she is again." The dancers moved apart again, and this time the woman was turned slightly toward them.

Duncan's brows lifted as heat lanced through his groin. She was exquisite. Masses of red hair, streaked with blond and honey, spilled over her shoulders. Her face was delicate, pointed at the chin with high cheekbones and dark eyes. Her lips were full. Ridiculously full. Erotically full. *Come suck me full*, he thought irritably. No woman should have lips so lush and plump. Her skin was flawlessly translucent, her lips a perfect rose. And full.

Composed and graceful, she exuded confidence that he would soon shatter with his seductive charm. "Untouchable" might have been branded on her forehead, and been more subtle than the way she carried herself. But he was man enough for such a dare; he would penetrate her reserve, gain entrance where he suspected few men had ever gone, and be satisfied only when she became a wanton she-animal in his bed. His gaze swept the length of her. Clad in a simple white gown beneath a green surcoat, her body in it was the only adornment necessary.

"Well?" Galan demanded. "What are you waiting for? Doona you need to tup to conquer?"

"Och, and aye," Duncan said, melting into the crowd.

Galan shook his head, and if his smile was a bit melancholy, he'd learned not to feel it.

* * *

Duncan surfaced behind her. He held his breath as his gaze played admiringly over her sensual mane. Soft, silky, and of a dozen flame hues, he longed to wrap his fists in it. He harbored a special passion for redheads. He longed to tug her head back and take her throat with his lips. He ached to spread her hair across his pillow. She, he would claim in a bed. Her fine body would require the soft

mattresses beneath her, to handle his intensity.

"Shall we dance?" he murmured in her ear.

She pivoted so quickly it startled him, and he fell back a step. Her lips were even more luscious up close, and when she moistened them with her tongue, he nearly groaned aloud.

Her eyes narrowed, and her lips parted around a knowing laugh. "Oh. It's *you*."

"Pardon?" He was taken aback. "Do we know each other, lass?" He was quite certain they didn't; he could never have forgotten this woman. The enticing manner in which her lips were currently pursed would have been seared into his memory.

"The answer is no. *I* don't know you. But every other woman in this room does. Duncan Douglas, isn't it?" she said dryly.

Duncan studied her face. Although she was young—perhaps no more than twenty—she had a regal bearing beyond her years. "I do have some reputation with the lasses," he conceded, downplaying his prowess, confident of her impending maidenly swoon.

The look she gave him was far from admiring.

He did a double take when he realized her gaze was downright disparaging.

"Not something I care for in a man," she said coolly. "Thank you for your offer, but I'd sooner dance with last week's rushes. They would be less used. Who wants what everyone else has already had?" The words were delivered in a cool, modulated tone, shaped by an odd accent he couldn't place. Quite finished with him, she presented her back and resumed talking to her companion.

Duncan was immobilized by shock.

Who wants what everyone else has already had? She made it sound as if he were all used up. Indeed! He certainly had much more to spare, and she would soon learn it. His hand closed upon the fine bones of her shoulder, and he spun her around. "That means I have all the more experience with which to pleasure you. And pleasure you I will," he promised. He waited for her to melt. The women

he'd seduced in the past had shivered at his possessive promises. He'd learned to offer them with a husky note in his voice, learned precisely what to say to affect a lass most.

"It *means*," she corrected with a mocking smile, "that you are a lothario. It *means* that you can't keep your tartan about your knees. It *means* that I am no different than anyone else, and that you hold no special regard for a cherished act of intimacy. I am not intrigued. I care naught for leftovers."

The infuriating woman gave him her back again.

He eyed the supple arch of her back, the lovely hips, the long legs moving in restless tempo to the music beneath her soft white gown. She tossed her head and laughed at something her companion said.

Abashed, he studied her companion. A foot taller than she, the man was lean and well muscled. They obviously shared a close relationship, leaning their heads close and laughing. Duncan's hands fisted at his sides.

What did a man say to that? *Yes, but now that I've seen you, I doona wish anyone else? All that was merely practice, preparing me for you?* He doubted that would be effective with this woman. She'd only laugh at him again.

Seething, he tapped her companion on the shoulder. "Pardon me, but are you her lover?"

"Who the hell are *you*!"

The redhead placed a soothing hand on her companion's arm, ignoring the look of fury Duncan directed at her ringers. "This is Duncan Douglas, Tally."

"Ah." Her companion smirked. "And as any blackguard worth his salt, confronted with the insurmountable challenge of your beauty, he must conquer you, eh, Beth?"

They shared an intimate glance. "I'm afraid so."

"Who *are* the two of you?" Duncan demanded. Never had he been so mocked, never had he felt so... so... insignificant. Unimportant.

"We are friends of Renaud de Vichiers, one of your Templars," she replied easily.

"We were on our way to Edinburgh when we heard Renaud was at Castle Brodie. I am Elizabeth... MacBreide." She gestured with an elegant, slim hand. "And this is my brother, Tally."

"MacBreide of Shallotan?"

"Near there," Tally replied evasively.

"Your brother," Duncan observed aloud, as the significance of their relationship sunk in. He was not her lover. He wouldn't have to kill him.

"And protector," Tally added dryly. "Do not think to attempt to seduce my sister, Duncan Douglas. We heard of your exploits shortly after arriving, and Beth said she saw you dallying with one of the maids."

Duncan cringed inwardly. He had indeed tugged less than privately early this morn. So, she had noticed him—and how long had she watched?

"Chasing her about in the bailey, then up onto the parapet," Elizabeth added, without the slightest blush. "The maids here cannot say enough about you. Even as far as the taverns in Inverness we'd heard of the wild and irreverent Douglas brother. They say there isn't a fair maid you haven't tumbled."

Words that would have made him preen with masculine pleasure on any other tongue made him wince, coming from her absurdly full lips. It was all too obvious what she thought of him. There was nothing he could say in his own defense; she plainly did not care for casual tugging, and he'd never concealed the fact that he relished it. There were certain rooms he'd entered in his life that had held a dozen different women he'd tugged. Never before had that fact bothered him.

Retreat and reform into afresh attack, he advised himself, then charge again when she least expects it. By God, this was battle, and if the front line couldn't be breached, he would find a way to circumvent her outlying guards and penetrate her flank. That he'd blown the first attack didn't mean he'd lost the war.

He raised her hand and kissed the air above it. "Elizabeth, Tally, welcome to Brodie," he said coolly before turning away.

As he moved off into the crowd, he walked tall, concealing the uncomfortable

sensation of slinking away from a resounding set-down. As he wove through the dancers, Duncan muttered darkly to himself. How dare she criticize him for being a good lover, an enthusiastic man? He was considerate with his wenches, he was patient, always ensuring their pleasure. How dare she belittle him for his... frequency. *Leftovers*, indeed!

Scowling, he headed for the courtyard, the glorious night now fractured by her disdain.

* * *

Armand watched the lord and lady with growing frustration. He'd been impatiently following her for days now, and not once had he been able to catch her alone. The laird was at her side constantly.

He must capture her tonight, or he would never make it to the arranged meeting place with James Comyn on time. He'd completed searching the castle, all but the laird's chambers, into which there was no entrance without the key. He'd even climbed to the roof, only to encounter a dozen forbidding guards, at which point he'd pretended to have sought the gloaming to meditate closer to God. There would be no scaling the wall to the laird's room, for the castle was too carefully observed. But surely she had a key, and once he snared her, he would spare time to search their private bedchambers before leaving. He needed those weapons.

He gritted his teeth, watching Circenn toss back more wine. The man had consumed such quantities that any other man would have sought the garderobe long before now. His eyes narrowed as he watched Lisa whisper something in Circenn's ear. He noted that she briefly pressed her hand to her abdomen.

Ah, although he might hold his drink well, she did not. Armand slipped through the crowd, maintaining an innocuous distance, ready to sprint to her side the moment she left the protective arms of the forbidding laird of Brodie.

* * *

Lisa was dazzled by her first medieval feast. She'd never forgotten the night she'd first arrived at Castle Brodie and gazed up at the towering structure, thinking how incredible it would be to belong within its walls, to be part of a laughing, warm group of clansmen. To belong.

And now she did.

Circenn had proudly introduced her to his people, and although she'd noticed he stumbled over many of their names, that didn't worry her overmuch. She could change that. She would help him get reacquainted with his clan and draw him into the joy of their lives.

"Why do you smile, lass?"

Lisa tipped back her head. Happiness radiated from him, increasing hers tenfold. Clad in full clan regalia, he looked like a savage Scot warlord, but she knew what kind of man he really was. Intense and deeply emotional. Mercilessly sexual. Gentle. A dizzying wave of feeling grew and spread inside her. "So this is what it feels like," she whispered. She gazed up at him, her eyes wide with discovery.

"What what feels like?"

"Circenn." A wealth of emotion infused his name.

He watched her, unblinking.

"I love you."

Circenn drew a sudden, deep breath. There it was. There was no coyness about her, no games, no attempt to hide the truth or manipulate him into making such a declaration first. Boldly she gave her heart. Why would he have expected anything less?

He swept her into his arms and closed his eyes, absorbing the feelings ebbing and flowing between them.

"Does this mean you are not adverse to the fact that I've lost my heart to you?" she teased.

"Could a man be adverse to the sunshine warming his skin? A spring rain quenching his thirst or a night such as this one, when any wonder seems possible? Thank you." His smile was devastating. "I'd begun to fear you might never give me those words."

"And?" she encouraged. He said nothing, but suddenly a shiver of pleasure

danced beneath her skin. It penetrated her thoroughly, leaving her breathless.
"What was *that*?"

"I've been practicing trying to say it without words. Did it work?"

She blew out a calming breath. "Oh yes," she said. "I want you to do that tonight when we're... you know."

"Aye, aye, mistress," he teased. "And how about this one?"

Lisa's nipples stiffened as a wave of dark eroticism washed over her. "Oh, God. That was truly amazing."

"This bond can be wonderful, can it not?"

Smiling her agreement, Lisa stood on tiptoe and kissed him. When he moved to deepen the kiss, she pulled back. He looked startled, so she hastened to reassure him. "I've drunk too much wine, Circenn. I'm afraid I must find one of those dratted chamber pots." She sighed morosely. "There are some things I really miss about my century."

"A chamber pot? Why not use the garderobe?"

"The *what*?"

"The garderobe."

"You have garderobes here?" she said stiffly.

He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Not that I wish to pry, lass, but where have you been going?"

"Chamber pots," she muttered.

"And what have you been doing... er..."

"Dumping them out the window," she said, prickly as a porcupine. So much for demure privacy. If there was a garderobe, why on earth had Eirren told her to use the chamber pot? Then she realized how mischievous the lad could be. It was just like Eirren to be prankish. "Was there a garderobe at Dunnottar, too?"

"It is *you* who has been dumping them out the windows? I have been blaming it

on my men, making them wash down the stones. Aye, there was one at Dunnottar. I had garderobes put in every keep I own or visit."

"You never told me."

"You never asked. How was I to know? When you first arrived here, I wasn't about to address such private issues. I assumed you had found our garderobe on your own."

Lisa snorted. Eirren had truly bamboozled her, and her pride had kept her tidily trapped in his jest. "I can't believe all this time I've... Oh! Where *is* the blasted garderobe?"

He told her, biting his lip to keep from smiling. He watched her hips sway gently in her emerald gown as she climbed the stairs. She'd said she loved him. That was promising.

Perhaps it was nearly time to talk to her about loving him forever.

CHAPTER 23

LISA SHOOK HER HEAD AS SHE EXITED THE GARDEROBE. Very civilized. Now that she knew where it was, she couldn't believe she'd bypassed it while she'd searched the castle for the flask, but the entrance gave the impression of a servant's door, so she'd not given it a second thought. The garderobe was not what she had expected; it was larger than most modern bathrooms, and spotless. It was obvious that the laird of Brodie prided himself on tidy garderobes. Fresh herbs and dried petals were scattered amid the hay piled inside the chamber—medieval toilet paper.

She resolved not only to bathe Eirren the next time she saw him but to dunk him a time or two as well for all those miserable chamber-pot moments.

Slipping from the small room, she was surprised to encounter Armand Berard loitering in the corridor.

"Milady, are you enjoying the festivities?"

"Yes, I am." Her feet were still tapping from the cheery music and she was eager to return and perfect her steps. But she hadn't seen Armand for over a month and had rather missed the opportunity to get to know a real live Knight Templar. She frowned, eyeing his somber attire.

Circenn had told her the Templars would stay in their garrison and not join the revelry. "I thought your Order did not hold with feasting such as this."

He shrugged. "Some of my brothers are more rigid than others. A few of us have accepted that the Order is destroyed, bitter though it is to admit that you have pledged your life to something that no longer exists."

"I'm sorry," Lisa said, feeling awkward. Before her stood one of the legendary Knights Templars and she couldn't think of one thing to say to make him feel better. "Are your men hunted, even here in Scotland?" she rushed on. She was intensely curious about the Templars, their legendary powers and myths.

"It depends on who encounters us. If it's an Englishman, he might try to take us across the border. A Scot is far less inclined to do so. Most of your people care

little for the edicts of France, England, or even the Pope." He uttered a harsh laugh. "Your own king was excommunicated by the Pope for the murder of the Red Comyn in the church at Dumfries. Your land is a wild one. When a country is fighting merely for the right to survive, they are less inclined to be judgmental. Come."

He offered his arm, and she looped hers through it. Within moments, she was so engrossed in their conversation that she paid no heed to where he was leading her.

She listened, fascinated, while he spoke of the Order, of their residence outside Paris, of their lifelong commitment to their vows. His expression grew bitter as he recounted how the papal bull *Pastoralis praeeminentiae*, issued on November 22, 1307, had ordered all monarchs of Christendom to arrest the Templars and sequester their lands in the name of the papacy. He skimmed over the persecution, the interrogations, and the torture, unwilling to give such detail to a woman, for which she was grateful. There were some limits to even her curiosity.

He explained how, in 1310, six hundred of their brothers had agreed to mount a defense against the unjust persecution, and Pope Clement had finally agreed to postpone the Council of Vienne for a year while they prepared. Then, Philippe the Fair, desperate to crush the Order and line his coffers before it was too late, circumvented the Pope, reopened his episcopal inquiry, and had fifty-four Templars burned at the stake outside Paris, silencing the remaining Templars' protests. In 1312, the papal bull *Vox in excelso* was issued, forever suppressing the Order.

There were many questions she wanted to ask him, and this was a rare opportunity to explore history from a Templar's perspective, but her first question was patently twenty-first century, brushed by a bit of romanticism.

"What is the secret of the Templars, Armand?" So many rumors abounded: that they had protected the Holy Grail, that the Grail was really the genetic bloodline of Christ, that the Templars had uncovered a personal alchemy for the transformation of the soul, that such alchemy could manipulate time and space. She didn't really expect him to answer, but since she had her arm through the arm of a Templar, there was no harm in asking.

Armand's smile made her shiver. "Do you mean what could we possibly possess that would make a king and a Pope fear us so greatly they would use every weapon they had to destroy us? Are you a religious woman, Lisa MacRobertson?"

"A bit," she conceded.

"What might the Pope and king want from us?"

"Gold?" she guessed. "Religious artifacts?"

His laughter sent a chill up her spine. "Consider this:

What if the Templars had discovered something that would tear asunder beliefs that had been held for centuries by nearly every land in the world?"

Now he really had her curiosity going. "You *must* tell me," she breathed.

"I didn't say that we had," he prevaricated. "I merely postulated the possibility."

"So, is it true then?" she asked, fascinated. "Does your Order possess such knowledge?"

He didn't answer. His face was averted, so she didn't see it contort with rage, hence she was completely unprepared when he grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back, arcing it up between her shoulder blades, forcing her to double over in an effort to escape the pain.

He shoved her against the wall and pressed a knife to her side.

Lisa was so stunned that she made no sound. One moment she was strolling with a perfectly sociable Templar, indulging her incessant curiosity, teetering on the brink of stunning revelations, and the next her life was being threatened. It had happened too swiftly for her to grasp, and, in shock, she had wasted precious seconds during which she might have fought back.

"Give me the key," Armand growled into her ear. "And if you so much as whimper, I will kill you."

"The key to what?"

"Circenn's chambers."

"I don't have one!"

"You lying little—" Hooking a thick forearm around her throat, he patted her body, searching for a key ring. "Then it is in your room," he accused.

"He has never given me one!"

Armand tightened his arm around her throat, cutting into her windpipe. His arm was an unrelenting band of steel, and Lisa felt her air supply being cut off. Her cheek smashed against the stone wall, and she grew dangerously light-headed.

"We can play as rough as you like, lass," Armand murmured into her hair.
"Where is the key?"

Lisa closed her eyes and reached for Circenn.

* * *

Circenn crushed his metal goblet in his hand, spraying half a dozen villagers with wine. He glanced about, his eyes wild.

Lisa.

Danger. Frightened. Can't breathe.

But where?

He raced up the stairs to the garderobe, feeling for her with his heart, reassuring her he was coming.

Pain.

He cursed the emotional bond by which he could share her feelings but not obtain words or a hint of her location. Where would she have gone? How could she be in danger? Who could possibly wish her ill?

He ranged the corridors like a maddened beast, fighting an urge to bellow for her, aware that that would only alert whoever was threatening her. He paced up the south corridor, then back. Every ounce of his intellect was absorbing her fear, sponging it up, and it was rendering him senseless. He plunged down a hall, then

stopped abruptly.

Brash fury would not serve. He must be logical. He should check his room and hers, then other areas she had been inclined to attend. Perhaps the chapel. He pivoted sharply and raced back down the hall. He flew through the castle and into the east wing.

As he neared his chambers he slowed, alerted by a soft murmur and a strangled sound. Drawing to a halt, he slipped stealthily around the corner.

Armand had Lisa pressed up against the wall outside his chambers, his thick forearm choking her to unconsciousness. Circenn labored to draw slow, silent breaths when his lips begged to roar. She was going limp in the Templar's arms, giving up the fight as she lost her precious breath.

A flicker of silver flashed in the dim glow from the rushlights mounted on the walls. The Templar had a blade. Circenn didn't wait to see more. He drew on his unnatural abilities and moved like the wind, stopping behind the Templar, who had no warning that Circenn stood a breath behind his heart.

"The key, you stupid bitch," Armand muttered. "Don't pass out on me." He shook her. "Where does he keep the hallows?"

Circenn's mouth twisted. So that was what this was about. A rogue Templar, turned on his Order. Armand wasn't the only knight who'd lost his faith. Circenn had heard of others who, believing that God had abandoned them, had turned mercenary and faithless.

In an instant of blurred space, Circenn disarmed the knight and flung him across the corridor, where he struck the stone wall with a sharp crack of his head. He slumped to the floor. Circenn spared no regret that the attack had been unfair. When in the past he'd suffered guilt over using his enhanced abilities, he now felt grim satisfaction. He towered over the fallen knight and raised his sword for the fatal blow.

"Stop!" Lisa cried.

Circenn's jaw locked, his face contorted with fury. His arm suspended at eye level, the point angled down, ready for one swift thrust into Armand's heart. When he plunged down, it would be with such anger that the force would likely

shatter his blade against the stone beneath the knight's back. He spared her a glance, and from her horrified expression he realized that she was feeling his internal landscape: barren, bleak, and murderous. Hot. Hellishly hot. He would never understand—not even should he live to be five thousand—why women consistently protected villains. It was simple in a man's mind: *Kill the man who tries to harm your own*. But women made it much more complex. They held out hope that evil could be redeemed. A foolish hope, to his way of thinking.

"Don't kill him, Circenn. He didn't harm me." She touched her throat with gentle fingertips. "I will be fine. A few bruises, nothing more. You found us in time."

"He touched you," Circenn snarled. "He planned to harm you."

"But he didn't succeed." She appealed to his logic: "Question him, determine what he is after, then banish him, but please..."

She trailed off and he stared helplessly at her. *Damn her*, he thought. She was deliberately flooding him with mercy, forgiveness, and the cool wind of logic. All those feminine things, they tumbled like snowflakes upon his masculine heat.

Dousing it.

Loath though he was to admit it, she was right. By killing Armand swiftly, he would never know his motives. He needed to uncover the Templar's purpose, determine with whom he was in collusion and if there were other corrupt knights in his employ. He needed information first. Then he would kill him. He lowered the sword with a low growl of unsatisfied rage.

* * *

Lisa crept down the stairs. She'd tried to wait in bed for Circenn to come up, but had been unable to stand it any longer. It had been hours since Armand's attack, and although Circenn had promised not to kill the Templar, vowing angrily that he would turn him over to his own brothers, Lisa still felt his murderous fury. Their bond was frazzling her nerves. She had no idea why the knight had turned on her. Perhaps she shouldn't have questioned him. Perhaps it was simply too upsetting for him to speak of the atrocities he'd endured.

The feast was still under way in the Greathall, the villagers oblivious to the bitter

events of the evening. Circenn would keep the problem quiet, resolve it, and no one would suffer for it. She admired his methods. He was a laird who would not trouble his clan with dissension that he could resolve alone.

Moving stealthily, she slipped down the corridor to the study. The door was ajar and she peered in cautiously. He was there, as she'd suspected, with Duncan and Galan.

A dozen grim-faced Templars filed before him, and from the light misting of rain on their robes, she deduced that she'd missed their entrance by mere minutes.

"It is done, milord. We have finished our interrogation," Renaud de Vichiers said wearily.

"And?" Circenn growled.

"It was worse than we feared. He was doubly a traitor, both to his own brothers and to Scotland. His plan was to abduct your lady and sell her to the English king for his weight in gold, plus titles and lands in England." Renaud shook his head. "I do not know what to say. It grieves me. Armand was a Commander of Knights in our Order, and highly regarded. We had no idea. I swear to you upon our Order that he acted entirely alone." Renaud directed his gaze to the floor. "We await your decision regarding the rest of us. We understand if you decide you must send us away from here."

Circenn shook his head. "I will not hold the rest of you responsible for his actions. You have been loyal to me for years."

The Templars rustled with murmurs of gratitude and repeated vows of loyalty. "You have been good to us, milord," Renaud said. He took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, it was with such fervency that his words sounded stilted. "We do not wish to jeopardize your goodwill in any way. We look forward to a future in Scotland. What can we do to restore your faith in us?"

"It was never lost," Circenn said, rubbing his jaw. "If Armand hadn't been acting alone, you likely would have succeeded in taking her. I do not underestimate the powers of your Order, Renaud. I know what you can do when you pit multiple Templar wills against a problem. An attack from multiple brethren would have peacefully lured her where you wished her to go. You do not use violence. You

use... powerful persuasion."

Renaud looked abashed. "I hadn't considered that, but it's true. We could have taken her as a group. I forget you know so much about us." He bowed, a posture of abject apology. "Milord, we would never harm your lady. We shall protect her as our own."

Circenn inclined his head. "What of Armand?"

"As a show of our allegiance, we resolved that matter. He will trouble you no more."

Lisa leaned a bit closer to the door. What had they done to him? Banished him? Would they drive him across the border for the English to catch?

"Explain," Circenn ordered.

"We determined his crime and dispensed fitting punishment."

"He is dead?" Circenn asked wearily.

"He died by receiving the price he himself had named for his corruption. We gave him his weight in gold."

Lisa made a strangled sound that was fortunately masked by Circenn's own. Her eyes flew to his, but he hadn't yet noticed her. He looked shocked.

"Do not fear we acted wastefully," Renaud hastened to assure him. "We know we will require the gold to rebuild both our Order and Scotland once the warring is over. We will reclaim it when we quarter Armand."

Lisa retched instinctively, unable to contain it. A dozen eyes flew to the door, where she stood clutching her stomach.

"Lisa," Circenn exclaimed, half rising. His eyes were wide and apologetic. "I asked you to wait in your room."

"You know I never do," she said irritably. "Why would you expect me to this time?" She looked directly into Renaud's eyes. "What do you mean you gave him his weight in gold and will retrieve it?" She knew she shouldn't ask, but her suspicions were so awful that she couldn't help herself. If they didn't tell her, she

would just imagine atrocities. She'd long ago found it was easier to deal with reality than imagined fears.

Renaud did not respond, clearly reluctant to discuss the matter with a woman.

"Tell me," she repeated, through clenched teeth. She glanced at Circenn, who was watching her with sorrow and understanding. She appreciated that he did not try to shield her; he understood that she needed her own answers in things.

Renaud cleared his throat uneasily. "Molten. Poured down his throat. It will cool and be removed without difficulty."

"*Lisa!*" Circenn rose from the desk, but it was too late.

She was already running down the hall.

CHAPTER 24

IT WAS SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE LISA RETURNED TO HER normal self. Circenn spent the time busying himself on the estate, waiting patiently as she worked through her feelings. He was never alone, always accompanied by the pressure of her heart. One day, he'd almost sworn that he'd heard her voice right next to his ear, muttering *pig-headed, bloodthirsty primates*, but the phrase had not made any sense to him. Whatever it meant, she must have been feeling it very strongly for him to pick it up. He wondered if their bond would continue to grow stronger over time, affording them deeper communication.

He respected her mild retreat, accepting that it was a necessary part of her adjustment to their way of life. His time must seem strange to her, and the ways of the Templars would likely seem extreme in any century. He was deeply grieved that she had found out about Armand, but if he had learned nothing else about Lisa Stone, he had learned how great her curiosity was. She wished to be shielded from nothing; she wished to be accorded respect and given all the knowledge available so she could make her own choices from a well-informed position.

He would not have wished Armand's gruesome death upon any man, yet the Templars had their own justice and dispensed it with the same unyielding discipline with which they performed all their duties. In his heart he acknowledged that he was not sorry the man was dead. Armand had nearly killed his woman, nearly snuffed her fragile, tiny, delicate life.

And that terrified him.

Armand's brutality had elevated Lisa's mortality to an obsession with him. He loathed it, resented it—her mortality had become his archenemy.

Was he becoming like Adam? Was it in this fashion that such a monster had been fabricated? Did one broken rule permit the next and the next, until finally he would be able to justify taking anything he wanted? Where was the line that he must not traverse before it was too late?

You could make her immortal. You know you want to. You wouldn't even have to tell her.

Aye, he wanted to. And it confounded him. He'd been married twice and never once considered trying to make his wife immortal.

But no other woman was Lisa.

Besides, up until now, he'd viewed what Adam had done to him as a curse, a vile corruption of the natural order of things. But now that he'd found Lisa, things were no longer so clear. Since she'd arrived in his life, he'd been reevaluating his beliefs, his objections, and his prejudices. He longed to storm into his castle, unearth the flask from its compartment in the stone, and force it between her lips, but he could never justify taking her choice away from her. Somehow, he had to bring himself to tell her.

Argh! he thought, closing his eyes. *How?*

Though he grudgingly accepted his immortality, after five hundred years there was much about himself he still despised. By Dagda, he'd been born in the ninth century! There was a part of him that was hopelessly old-fashioned. Although time's passage had carried him out of the ninth century, nothing could remove the ninth-century sensibilities from his heart. Part of him was a simple warrior and superstitious man who believed that magic sprang from evil; hence, he was an abomination teetering on the brink of corruption.

He suspected that holding on to his birth-century's mores made him a bit of a barbarian, but that was preferable to what he might have become.

Still, he had to reach a decision, and soon. He needed to tell Lisa what he was and offer her the same, before her mortality completely undid him.

Helplessly, he'd begun to obsess about her environment. She suddenly seemed incredibly vulnerable. He'd begun to blow out rushlights compulsively, afraid they might spark and catch the tapestries and she would die in something as senseless as a castle fire. He'd begun to study every man he encountered, seeking hints of any possible threat to her existence. Armand's attempt to abduct her had escalated his fears. She was delicate, and one slip of a knife could steal her from him forever. Once, he'd thought forever was bitter indeed, but now, having loved her, if he lost her, forever would be a cold, bleak hell.

Perhaps, via their special bond, she would understand and accept. Perhaps the

thought of living forever would appeal to her. He would never know until he tried. The worst that could happen was that she would be horrified, reject him, and try to escape. If that occurred, he worried, he might truly revert to his ninth-century self, and lock her up until she agreed to drink from the flask. Or worse—do to her what Adam had done to him.

* * *

Lisa was curled in a chair before the fire when he entered the study. She smiled warmly at him. They shared a wordless greeting with their eyes, then she parted the chair beside her. He moved to her side and rested a portion of his weight on the arm of the chair, and bent to kiss her thoroughly. God, he couldn't bear the thought of ever losing her.

When he finally forced himself to break the kiss—it was either that or tup her right there in the chair with the study door open—she glanced at him curiously and said, "You were frustrated today. Many times. What is worrying you, Circenn?"

He sighed. Sometimes their bond was a troublesome thing; there wasn't much he could hide from her, and the effort of withholding his emotions was exhausting. "You were stricken by ennui," he countered, not yet ready to broach the difficult conversation. Better to savor a few moments of peace and intimacy. "But then you seem to be that way often when you are not in my bed," he teased. In bed was precisely where he wanted her now. Perhaps lulled by sensual satisfaction she would be more receptive. A mercenary tactic, but deployed with love. He caressed her hair, savoring the silky feel between his fingers.

Lisa laughed, a low, inviting sound. "Circenn, I need something to do with myself. I need to feel... *involved*."

He'd been thinking that very thing, as her frustration had attended him for quite some time now, ever since their bond had blossomed into existence. He knew that in her century Lisa had worked constantly, and she was a woman who needed to feel she had accomplished something worthwhile at the end of the day.

"I will have Duncan bring you the list of the pending disputes to be heard in the manor court in Ballyhock.

Would you like that? Galan has been hearing the cases for the past few years and

would be pleased to get quit of the position."

"Really?" Lisa was delighted. She would love to immerse herself in the villagers' lives, perhaps make friends among the young women. Someday, she would have children with Circenn, and she missed having a girlfriend. She would want her children to have playmates. She didn't understand why Circenn had kept himself so distant from his people in the past, but she planned to bring him close again. Hearing the cases and mingling with the clansmen would be the perfect way to set her plans in motion.

"Certainly. They will be most pleased."

"Are you certain they will accept a mere lass deciding disputes?" she asked worriedly.

"You are *not a* mere lass. And they adored you when they met you at the feast. Besides, I am Brude, Lisa."

"I must have missed that part of history in school. Who were the Brude?"

"Ah, merely the most valiant warriors who ever lived," he said, arching an arrogant brow. "We are the original Picts; many of our kings were named Brude, until we assumed that as our name. Brodie is merely another form." *Is now the time to tell her more of my history? That my half-brother Drust the Fourth was slain by Kenneth McAlpin in 838?* "Being Brude, the descent of royalty in my line was matrilineal for centuries, handed down through the queens, not our kings. The crown transferred to brothers or nephews or cousins as traced by a complicated series of intermarriages by seven royal houses. My people will readily accept the decisions of the Lady of Brodie."

"Sounds like the Picts were more civilized than the Scots," Lisa said dryly.

"This legion which curbs the savage Scots' is how Emperor Claudius referred to my people, and for a time we did. Until Kenneth McAlpin murdered most of the members of our royal house in an attempt to erase us from Scotland forever."

"But you still live, so apparently he wasn't too successful."

Ah, yes. I do still live.

"So why were you frustrated today?" she asked, circling back to her initial observation. "I can feel you all the time, you know. I could feel impatience and anger."

Circenn stood and scooped her from the chair. He dropped into it and reseated her across his lap. "That's better. I like being beneath you."

"I like you *being* beneath me. But don't try to distract me. Why?"

Circenn sighed, gathering her close. He was afraid. He, the fearless warrior, feared her reaction to what he was about to tell her.

As he drew a breath to begin, he heard the door to the Greathall crash open, as guards all over the castle sent up a resounding cry.

They both tensed instantly.

"Is someone attacking?" Lisa worried.

Circenn rose swiftly, depositing her on the floor with a kiss. "I doona know," he said, taking off for the Greathall at a run. Lisa raced after him, as the noise outside grew to an immense roar.

As she entered the Greathall, she saw dozens of knights clamoring excitedly, gathered around a lone stranger.

Duncan glanced up as they entered, and his smile was blinding. "To Stirling, Circenn! The Brace's messenger has arrived. We finally go to war!"

CHAPTER 25

"WHAT SAY YOU?" CIRCENN DEMANDED, HIS EYES glittering with anticipation.

The messenger spoke quickly. "The Brace's brother has made a wager, and we must prevent the English from reaching Stirling Castle by Midsummer's Day. The Brace has ordered you to present your troops with all weapons at St. Ninian's by the Roman road—

Circenn cut him off with a deafening bellow of joy that was echoed by all the men in the hall. Lisa moved closer to his side and he caught her in his arms, swinging her high in the air. "We go to war!" he shouted, elated.

Men, she thought, amazed. *I will never understand them*. Then a worse thought followed: *What if I lose him?*

"But you must hurry," the messenger yelled into the din. "If we ride without pause we will scarce arrive in time. Every moment is critical."

Circenn hugged her close. "I will not die. I promise," he said fervently. He kissed her deeply, then slipped from her arms. There was no time to tell her more. He would go to war, and upon his return they would have their long-overdue talk. In the meantime, he would send constant reassurance to her via their bond.

War! It's about damned time! he thought, elated. "I must gather my weapons," he muttered, racing from the hall.

Drawn to spend every possible moment with him before he left, Lisa left the hall shortly after he had. The estate was a riot of activity as the men prepared to ride out immediately. She should have remembered that Circenn would have to leave soon. She'd known that the battle at Bannockburn occurred on June 24; history records had placed the thane of Brodie and his Templars in the midst of the legendary battle. But in the pleasure of their newfound love, and then in the fright of Armand's abduction attempt, she'd given little thought to the date or the impending war.

She headed for Circenn's chambers and slipped quietly into his room, wondering

if there was enough time to steal a moment of passion. She doubted it; she sensed that his mind was already far away. He was all masculine warrior right now, consumed with the looming battle. As she moved deeper into his room, she was shocked to see a great gaping maw in the wall where the hearth normally was.

A hidden room. *How fantastic*, she thought, *and how appropriate for a medieval castle*. Curious to see what he kept in there, she slipped past the hearth and entered. The fabric of her gown caught on the rough stones of the rotated hearth and ripped audibly. Busy trying to disengage the fabric from the sharp edge of the stone, she didn't see Circenn look up. Nor did she see his expression.

"Get out, lass," he thundered, leaping to his feet.

As Lisa glanced up, Circenn froze in mid-leap, his plan to thrust her from the room aborted. He watched with dawning horror as her gaze skimmed the interior of his hidden room. He stood motionless, surrounded by incriminating evidence. Standing amid items from her time, he knew that she would never believe him, and worse, that he must leave immediately if they were to prevent the English troops from reaching Stirling by Midsummer's Day.

Lisa was motionless but for her gaze, which roamed disbelievingly over the items in the room. Her eyes widened, narrowed, and widened again as she realized what she was seeing. Weapons, yes. Arms and shields, yes.

Inexplicably, items from her own century?

Yes.

The first wave of emotion that buffeted her was hers: a suffocating feeling of pain, bewilderment, and humiliation that she'd bequeathed her heart so wrongly. The second wave was his: an enveloping cloak of fear.

How could he possess such things? How could he have items from her time, yet not be able to send her home?

Simple. He'd lied. That was the only possible explanation.

"You lied," she whispered. She could have gone home to Catherine, but he'd lied. What else had he lied about?

Her hands closed on a CD player. *A CD player!* She raised it with shaking hands, peering closely at it, as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing. SONY was emblazoned on the chrome-colored case. Eyes narrowed, she flung it across the room, where it shattered into bits of plastic, narrowly missing his head. Unappeased, she reached for another missile, closing her fingers around an oddly familiar cardboard box. She spared it a glance, and her lip curled in disbelief.

"Tampons?" she cried. "You had *tampons*? All this time? How *dare* you!"

Circenn gestured helplessly. "I didn't know you had anything to clean."

She growled, a feral sound of pain and anger, as she flung the box of Playtex easy-glide applicators at him. It missed, too, hitting the wall behind him, showering the room with small white missiles. "No!" She raised a shaking hand when he moved to approach her. "Stay there. How much have you lied to me about? How many other women have you brought back here—that you needed tampons for? Did I not rate tampons? Was I won so easily that you didn't have to bribe me with conveniences? Was it all a lie? Is this some sick game I can't fathom? Didn't the fact that my mother is dying touch your heart at all? What are you made of? Stone? Ice? Are you even human? All this time you could have returned me, but you wouldn't?"

"Nay." He moved forward again, but stopped when she cringed back from him. His pained expression deepened.

"Don't even *think* of touching me. How you must have been amusing yourself with me. Me and my pathetic tears, me and my weeping for my mom, and all this time you could have returned me at anytime. You—

He let loose a bellow of pain and frustration. It had the desired effect of terminating her accusations, silencing her with its sheer volume.

As she stood there gaping, he said, "Listen to me because I doona have much time!"

"I'm listening," she hissed. "Like a fool, I'm waiting for you to give me one decent explanation for all of this. Go ahead—tell me more lies."

He ran a hand over his face and shook his head. "Lass, I have never lied to you. I

adore you and there have never been any other women from the future here. And these"—he flung a tampon in the air—"cleaning swabs, I cannot fathom why they upset you so greatly, but I assure you I have never let the maids use them."

Lisa's brow furrowed. No man could be so stupid. "Cleaning swabs?"

He snatched up a gun and jerked the barrel in her direction, and an unwrapped tampon shot out. It was coated with black from the slow corrosion of the steel. She eyed it for a moment, bent, and plucked it from the floor. "You clean your guns with these?"

He lowered the gun. "Is that not the purpose for which they were designed? I vow I could not conceive of another."

"Didn't you read the box?"

"There were too many words I didn't understand!"

Lisa's eyes widened and she reached for him internally, wondering why she hadn't done that first. There, where they joined, he could hide nothing from her. But she'd been so stunned that she hadn't been thinking clearly. She reached and felt...

Fear that she wouldn't believe him.

Pain.

And honesty. He genuinely didn't know what the tampons were. But there was something else, something he was willfully concealing. A monstrous dark thing, cloaked in despair. It made her shiver.

He raised his hands in a gesture of supplication. "Lisa, I never lied to you about the fact that I cannot return you. These are gifts a man named Adam brought me. I have never been to your time, nor can I get there, nor send anyone else."

She pondered his words, weighing them for truth. She recalled watching him pick through the fabrics and overhearing mention of this Adam person: Adam whose gifts Circenn had disdained, except for the gold fabric he'd chosen for her wedding gown.

One floor beneath them, men roared for Circenn.

Ignoring the summons, he said, "I would not have had it come out like this—not now, when I have no choice but to race off to battle. You must believe that I have never lied to you, Lisa. Believe in me and await my return. I promise we will speak of it all then. I will answer any questions you have, explain everything." He sighed, rubbing his jaw. His eyes were dark with emotion. "I love you, lass."

"I know. I can feel it." She inclined her head stiffly. "You do love me. If I hadn't blown up so quickly, I would have sensed your feelings and realized that all this aside, you harbored no intent to harm me."

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank Dagda for our bond."

"Go on," she said, encouraging him to reveal the dark secret that was yet untold. As Circenn moved toward the entrance she realized he'd misunderstood her words.

He looked askance when she didn't step aside. "I must reseal the chamber, lass, before I can ride out. I promise to let you examine it to your fill upon my return." He moved toward her, edging her back into his chamber.

"No," Lisa said quickly. "I meant go on and tell me the rest."

He stopped moving reluctantly. "I thought you meant that I should join my men and we would speak of this upon my return." He noted her tense jaw, her unyielding gaze. "What else do you sense?" he evaded.

"Something that terrifies me, because it scares you, and I suspect that anything that causes you fear would crush me. There is something you aren't telling me that your fear cloaks. You must tell me, Circenn. Now. The quicker you tell me, the more quickly you may go. What are you hiding from me?"

He drew a deep breath. "Adam, who gave me these oddities"—he gestured sweepingly—"could return you to your time. I did not tell you that because it was pointless. Recall that I swore an oath to kill the bearer of the flask?"

She nodded.

"Adam is the one I swore the oath to."

Lisa closed her eyes. "In other words, the only person who could return me

would kill me first. All right. What is the other thing?"

He looked at her with an expression of innocence she didn't buy for a moment. "I can still feel it, Circenn. You haven't told me the biggest thing."

"Lisa, I will tell you all, but now I must get to Stirling."

Conveniently—*it must be part of a male timing conspiracy*, Lisa thought—Duncan bellowed Circenn's name with obvious frustration.

"You see?" Circenn said. "The men await me. It will be a near race, Lisa. I must go."

"Tell me," she repeated evenly.

"Doona make me do this now."

"Circenn, do you really think I could bear sitting here for weeks wondering what other fantastic fact you've been concealing? It would be torture for me."

Circenn's hands clenched around the gun.

"I will follow you on horse, if I must, right into battle."

A pregnant, tense silence filled the space between them.

The continued bellows of the men below heightened her tension. Whom would he heed? His men or her? Lisa felt her heart pounding. He licked his lips and started to speak several times, then stopped, averting his gaze. When he finally spoke, his voice was tight and weary.

"My mother was a Brude queen who was born five hundred and seventy-odd years ago. I am immortal."

Lisa went as still as the stone walls around her. She blinked rapidly, deciding she must have misunderstood. "Say that again."

He knew which word she needed repeated. "Immortal. I am immortal."

Lisa stepped back. "As in live forever, like Duncan McLeod—the Highlander?"

"I doona know this Duncan McLeod, lass. I was unaware there was another like

me. The McLeod have never spoken of such a man."

Lisa could not speak for a moment. "Im-immortal?" she managed in a dry whisper.

He nodded. He thumped the stock of the gun on the floor in response to a particularly furious summons.

Rejecting the absurd possibility, Lisa reached for him emotionally. Her incredulity was squashed with one firm draw on their bond.

He was telling the truth. He was immortal.

Or at least he believed he was.

Could he be deluded? After a moment of reflection, she discarded that possibility. A person would know if he had lived five hundred years—it wasn't exactly something one could overlook.

Not looking at her, he continued, "I discovered I was immortal when I was forty-one."

"But you don't look forty-one," she protested, eager to object to any small part of such madness.

"I wasn't when Adam changed me. I was, as near as I can calculate, nearer thirty than forty. He never would admit exactly when he slipped me the potion. But when I confronted him, he confessed that he had indeed poisoned my wine."

"Why? And who is this man that possesses the power to make you live forever? Who is this Adam who could send me home? *What* is he?"

Circenn sighed. There was no point in trying to rush away now. He would give her a few answers to consider while he was gone. When he returned, he would tell her all, and offer her the flask again—to drink, this time. "He is of the old race called the *Tuatha de Danaan*. He is what some call the fairy."

"Fairy?" Lisa was incredulous. "You expect me to believe in fairies?"

Circenn smiled bitterly. "You accept that you have traveled seven hundred years across time, yet dispute the existence of creatures who predate us by millennia

and possess unusual powers? You cannot pick and choose your madnesses, lass."

"The fairy," Lisa repeated, sagging against the edge of the rotated hearth. "No wonder my traveling through time didn't seem so strange to you. I thought you'd accepted it unusually well."

"Think not of the fairies as wispy, ethereal creatures, flitting about on wings—they are not. They are an advanced civilization that inhabited some faraway world before they came to ours in a cloud of mist, thousands of years ago. No one knows whence they came. No one knows who or what they really are, but they are powerful beyond compare. They are immortal, and they are capable of sifting time."

"But *why* did he make you immortal?"

Circenn exhaled a bitter sigh. "He said he did it because his race had selected me as guardian of their treasures, of which the damned flask is one. That is why he made me swear to kill whoever found it. He said his race had long been looking for someone who could keep their hallows safe; they needed someone who would never die and could not be bested in battle."

"So you will truly live... forever?"

Circenn said nothing, his eyes dark with emotion. He nodded.

Lisa shook her head, beyond coherent thought. Her gaze swept over him, disbelievingly.

"Lisa—"

"No." She raised her hands as if to protect herself. "No more. That's it. I've heard enough for today. That's all I can hear. My ears are full."

"Is it so terrible a thing to accept? I accepted that you were from my future," he said. "*Haud yer wheesht!*" he roared, thumping on the floor again.

"Just let me have time to think. Please? Go. Go off to your war," she said, pointing to the door. Then a small, half-hysterical laugh escaped her.

"Lisa, I am not leaving you like this."

"Oh yes you are," she said firmly, "because according to my recollection of events, you and your Templars are necessary at Bannockburn." She needed desperately to be alone, to think. It was not hard for her to push him out to war, now that she knew he could not die. "But you bled when I poked you with the knife," she added, as an afterthought.

"Beneath my shirt the wound closed instantly, lass. I can bleed, briefly."

Footsteps thundered down the corridor; his men had exceeded their patience.

Circenn nudged her back a step and swiftly sealed the chamber. "You said my Templars were necessary at Bannockburn. You know of this battle?" he said, his gaze brooding.

"Yes."

"So it seems perhaps we've both been withholding information from each other," he pointed out quietly. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Is there anything else *I* should know?" she countered.

Suddenly he looked weary. "Just that I love you with all my heart, lass."

He kissed her swiftly and was gone.

CHAPTER 26

IMMORTAL. CIRCENN BRODIE WAS IMMORTAL.

How ironic, she thought. In the twenty-first century, she'd raged against her mother's mortality. Now, in the fourteenth, she was raging against his immortality.

Her life couldn't be a simple one of going to college and collecting kisses from handsome and mostly harmless young men. That just wouldn't do for Lisa Stone. She suddenly understood how bewildered and put-upon Buffy must have felt upon discovering it was her plight in life to slay vampires.

She hurt.

He rode miles away from her, but their bond did not diminish. She was battered by his feelings, buffeted by his anger and sorrow and guilt. She found herself pushing it away, relegating it to the background. She could not afford to feel what *he* was feeling right now. She needed to feel only her own emotions, to sort through them undistracted by his pulsing intensity.

The man was downright overwhelming sometimes, and it was no wonder. He had over five hundred years of living, and loving and losing his loved ones, and being invincible. She felt a surge of concern emanating from him because she was trying to shut him out. Too exhausted to do more, she sent a burst of reassurance, then firmly corralled his emotions in a corner of her mind.

That was better.

Perhaps a walk would clear her thoughts, she decided, rising from his bed, where she'd been sitting since he'd left.

She strolled through the silent castle and ventured into the night. It was strangely quiet: there were no knights jousting in the courtyard, no children playing—war was grim business indeed. She didn't have to worry about Circenn dying, but most families at Brodie had a loved one who might be mortally wounded in battle. An air of sobriety draped the estate.

Absorbed in her thoughts, she wandered to the reflecting pool and sank down on

the stone bench. Tilting her head, she gazed up at the velvety black sky. Why couldn't she have fallen in love with a normal, mortal man? She'd been so happy with Circenn, but she was a realist, if nothing else.

She had some idea of what it would be like to age. She knew how she would feel when she was forty and he was thirty still. She could only imagine with horror how she would feel when she was fifty, yet he still appeared thirty. She could taste the fear of being sixty—when she would be old enough that most would think she was his mother, or worse—in this land where women had children at fourteen—his grandmother.

Oh, God. Her body would age and wrinkle, but his never would.

Lisa didn't think she was a shallow person, but there was only so much a woman's vanity could willingly embrace. Would he still make love to her? Would she be able to permit him to gaze upon her when her body was so aged? It wasn't merely a question of vanity; the physical contrast between them would be a daily reminder that she was dying but he was not.

Take the years and don't think too far ahead, a part of her offered hopefully.

But she knew herself too well. She wouldn't be able to. She would be living in fear, watching her mirror, waiting for the inevitable.

And there was an even bigger picture to be considered.

Not only would she age while he didn't, she would ultimately die, while he continued to live. He would be left without her, and she knew she would have to encourage him to love again when she was gone—and, God forgive her, she didn't think she possessed such a noble soul.

Encourage Circenn to share such a precious, intimate bond again with some other woman? She was seized by hatred for her faceless, nameless successor.

But she would have to, because she knew him well enough to know that he shared her tendency for self-inflicted atonement. He would deny himself. He could spend thousands of years alone, refusing intimacy, and such stark solitude would drive any person mad. He *must* love again after she was gone, for the sake of his own soul.

Then, too, there was her intimate knowledge of what her death would do to him; because of their bond, he would feel every less-than-noble emotion she endured, and every bit of the pain. She knew what it felt like to watch a loved one die. It went beyond hell.

What if she had actually been able to feel her mother's physical pain over the last few months? Her despair and her fear?

Circenn would feel every bit of hers, unless she could somehow hide it.

I can't! I'm not strong enough!

Frantic, she lunged to her feet, driven to movement.

She walked swiftly, skirting the pool, gazing up at the heavens as if they might hear her and grant a prayer. Focused on the sky, she tripped and fell to the ground.

It was the final straw. Crying, she huddled with her arms about her knees and began to rock. After a few moments she realized that she had fallen on the side of the mound and was weeping in probable chamber-pot remains.

She went very still.

It is said that if you circle the mound seven times and spill your blood upon the peak, the Queen of the Fairies may appear and grant you a wish.

Recalling Circenn's words, she slowly opened her eyes.

But what would she wish?

I cannot guess how many young lads and lasses have pricked their fingers here. Old, tall tales—this land is full of them. Most likely some prior kin once emptied the chamber pots here. It would explain how thick and green the grass is.

But she didn't know what might happen next in her life. Why not try it? She could decide upon a wish later, if it worked.

Numbly, she stood and began circling the *shian*. Slowly at first, then picking up speed and determination as she progressed around the mound.

One time, three times, five, then seven.

She stopped. She realized she didn't have anything to cut herself with. With a peculiar detachment, she pierced the heel of her palm with her teeth, drawing blood. She ascended to the peak of the *shian* and, applying pressure with her fingers, forced the droplets to fall on the center of the mound.

She waited.

She had no idea what she expected, if anything. But considering how strange her life had been for the past few months, it would not surprise her overmuch if a fairy sprang from the earth, waving a magic wand.

She held her breath. The night was eerily still, even the night creatures strangely mute.

Nothing happened.

Oh, Lisa—no Fairy Queen will spring from this mound, and you will simply have to deal with the fact that you are in love with an immortal man.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, amused by her foolish fancy. After a moment more, she descended the unusually symmetric pile of sod.

This land had definitely done something to her blood. She'd nearly believed that a mythical creature would appear. Magic pervaded Scotland's air as thick and frequent as the mist, and she'd discovered little that seemed beyond the realm of possibility. Circenn was immortal. She had traveled through time. Making a wish seemed very reasonable in comparison.

She turned her back on the mound, tilted her head, and gazed at the moon, admitting that despite her hurt and fear, she was more than a little relieved. Too many choices could be overwhelming. Now she had none; she had no choice but to stay there and love Circenn Brodie.

Perhaps she would learn to view aging, while he remained ageless, as a small price for the kind of love they shared. She felt for him with her inner senses, slowly removing her earlier barricades. From their bond, she knew he was hurt, angry, and deeply worried. He was also consumed with fear that she would somehow try to leave him.

Well, he needn't worry about that. She couldn't.

"What shall you wish, human?" A voice that held a thousand cool shades of snow shattered her reverie, chilling her blood.

Lisa froze.

CHAPTER 27

THE VOICE HAD COME FROM BEHIND HER, WHERE THE fairy mound lay.

"You were watching the moon, as one entranced. Do you wish to fly to it? To count the stars as you touch them? Or something more... earthy?"

Lisa drew a deep breath as the voice shivered through her. Not a mortal voice. She could never mistake such a sound for a mortal voice. It resonated with tune and with passionless observation. It frightened her. She turned slowly on her heel. The sight that greeted her was frightening only in the magnitude of its beauty. The air caught in her windpipe, forcing her to draw rapid, shallow breaths.

"Lovely," she whispered. "Oh, God." She suddenly understood the lure of fairy tales, of creatures who were so blindingly beautiful that it nearly hurt to look at them. This creature overwhelmed her senses.

The vision inclined her head regally. "We are. Lovely, that is. But not gods. Most call us children of the Goddess Danu."

Lisa stared, lips parted on a sigh, mesmerized. The woman had silver hair—moonbeams had brushed her delicate head, loath to depart. The night air shimmered around her, as if lit by a thousand tiny suns. Her brows arched above exotic almond-shaped eyes in a pale face. And her eyes—they were of no color known to man, but conjured images of the iridescent hues of a mermaid's wet tail gleaming in the sun.

Her cheekbones were so high that they lent her face a feline cant, and her lips were full, blood-red, and uptilted at the corners as if caught in a perpetual smile. Her skin was dusted with gold; a sheer gown of white clothed her without covering a thing, and the body that was clearly visible beneath the shimmering fabric sparkled gilded pearl and rose, and made Lisa feel like she was twelve years old.

Perfection.

"What shall you wish, human?" Remote eyes held hers, widened by the barest hint of curiosity. "You made this door with your own blood, now wish before I weary of you."

Lisa swallowed. Here was her chance. All she had to say was, *I want to go home to my mother*. But could she leave Circenn? And how could she know whether her mother was still alive?

"Yes," the Fairy Queen said, tucking a strand of moonbeam behind her ear.

"What?" Lisa gasped.

"Your mother lives. If you call that living." Her lips shaped a moue of distaste. "A mortal bane, the body. She is dying."

"How did you know what I was thinking?" Lisa whispered.

The fairy laughed and the sound slithered around Lisa. For a moment, she lost herself in it: forgot who she was, that she had a mother, that she loved a man, that she was human.

For an instant she wanted nothing more than to linger as close to this creature as she would permit. To kiss the hem of her fairy skein, to breathe her exhales, to dance barefoot upon a mound of green. She recognized it for an enchanted madness, when the compulsion eased as the laughter faded.

"I am of the *Tuatha de Danaan*. We see all. So what shall it be, human? Shall I send you home to die with your mother? Is she so important? Shall you leave this lord who loves you?"

"I need time to think," Lisa protested faintly.

"You summoned me *now*"

"I didn't really think it would work. I have not prepared my wish—"

"If thou needed time to think, thou should not have disturbed me." The Fairy Queen's face grew thunderous. A breeze kicked up around the *shian*, tossing leaves into the air. Lisa was startled, turning around, absorbing the suddenly charged night. Charged by the Fairy Queen's displeasure.

"We are Scotland," the Queen stated, observing the disturbance. "The land once wept when we wept, and spring came when we danced. Now the seasons roll consistently, and aside from the fool's pranks, this soil is mostly tame."

"Because you are consistently detached, remote," Lisa said, before thinking. "Has time done that to you?"

The Fairy Queen blinked. Just a blink, but it said, *Tread not here, mortal*, in a forbidding glance that promised wrath Lisa never wanted to experience.

Lisa recovered quickly from her fumble. "I meant, will my mother be alive if I return?"

"For a time."

Lisa squeezed her eyes shut. She hadn't really believed that the Fairy Queen would appear and grant her wish. But now here stood a being that could, and apparently was offering to return her to her mother.

How could she choose? To stay in Scotland and watch her body grow old and fall apart while her beloved never aged, or to return to her time and watch her mother die?

Neither choice was unanimously appealing.

"I don't suppose you could bring my mother here? Maybe make her well?" Lisa suggested hopefully. "Perhaps you could make me immortal?"

"Two choices, human. Stay or go. I am not feeling generous, nor am I inclined to rearrange on a grand scale. It requires much will. A wish is a stone, and my granting is the toss into a loch. There are ripples. Shall I read your heart and find your true choice? You mortals think living is a war: Heart or mind? Silly child, guilt is not mind. Duty is not heart. Hear with that which your race claims we no longer possess. Shall I read your desire?"

Lisa's hand flew instinctively to her breast as if she could shield her heart from this creature. "No, I will choose, if you'll just give me a few moments."

"I weary of waiting. Would you like to see her?" The fairy unfurled a slim white hand toward the reflecting pool, and it grew glassy and still. Within the water,

like a silvery portal, her mother's bedroom took shape. It was dawn in the twenty-first century and Catherine was awake, a rosary clasped between her gnarled hands. Lisa cried out when she saw her, for illness had taken so much of her life that it was hard to believe she still breathed. She was praying aloud. *She was alive!*

During the past few weeks—convinced she would never see her again—Lisa had nearly laid her to rest in her heart, but her mother still lived and breathed and was missing her desperately, worried sick.

Lisa shook her head bitterly, confounded by her choices. The vision of her mother was a fatal blow. Catherine was alive in the twenty-first century, and after all these months she must certainly have given up Lisa for dead. But Lisa had the chance to go back and hold her hand, and reassure her that her only child was well. To hold her hand while she died. To comfort and love, and keep her from dying alone.

Emotions overwhelmed her, and dimly she felt Circenn panicking somewhere out in the night—reading her feelings. Firmly, she shut him out.

Lisa glanced again at the pool and suffered a killing vision of herself in Catherine; weakened by life, faded, a brittle wisp of desire to live, gazing up at Circenn, who would be untouched by time.

Circenn had given her love. Catherine had given her love. Circenn would live forever. Lisa knew how Catherine's death was destroying her, breaking her heart. When she died, Circenn would be subjected to such pain. If she stayed what would she have? To grow old while Circenn never aged, to die while the magnificent warrior stood by her bed, holding her hand, his heart breaking. He, who had lost so many loved ones over five hundred years. Wouldn't it be kinder to go now than to make him suffer her death in ten or thirty or fifty years? She knew intimately the pain of losing someone so deeply loved.

Her head hurt and the back of her throat burned with the effort of suppressing tears.

Lisa turned in a slow circle, taking a long look at Castle Brodie, the enchanted night, the beauty that was the Scottish Highlands. *I love you with all my heart, Circenn*, she willed into the night. *But I fear I am a coward and have little*

stamina. The years would destroy me.

"Well?" the Fairy Queen demanded.

"Oh," she gasped around a swift intake of air, jarred from her thoughts.

"Now," the Queen pushed.

"I... oh... h-home," she said so softly that the wind snatched it from her lips and it was nearly lost. But the Fairy Queen heard.

"What of the lord? Do you not wish to say farewell?"

"He is gone," she said, tears slipping down her cheeks. "He's on his way to Bannockburn—

"Bannockburn!" The fairy stiffened, and looked nearly alarmed, although it was difficult to tell in such a face. She clapped her hands, spoke in a language Lisa couldn't understand, and suddenly the night went mad around her.

The *shian* glowed, light rushed from within it, and Lisa was treated to a sight few humans ever glimpsed, or lived to tell of.

Fairies by the dozens poured from the *shian*, bursting into the night, mounted on mighty horses. A tempest blew up around her, tossing leaves and limbs, and the very earth seemed to strain as it loosed its strange cargo—the wild hunt.

"To Bannockburn," they cried.

She had no idea how long it lasted, the mad surge of exotic creatures rushing by. The ground trembled, the moon hid nervously behind a cloud, even the trees seemed to draw back from the *shian*. Lisa couldn't help it—near the end she had to close her eyes.

At last the night was silent and she cautiously peeped at the *shian*. A man stood there, tall, powerful, with silky dark hair, regarding her.

"They forget the time," he said dryly. "Edward has more than triple the Scots' troops, and my people have a vested interest in this battle. Circenn and his men will arrive in time to save the day. My people love to observe mortal triumphs and casualties."

"Who are you?" Lisa gasped, praying he wouldn't laugh. Sensuality dripped from the man, a sensuality that nearly competed with the effect Circenn had upon her. If he laughed as the Fairy Queen had, she feared she might lose herself in his seductive madness.

Send her, came the Fairy Queen's bodiless command. *And then you are free to leave my side.*

What of my sifting time and weaving worlds? he demanded.

I withhold them still. You are restrained until I otherwise decree, Adam.

Adam made a furious gesture, then returned his attention to Lisa. "It seems your wish has been granted." The corner of his mouth curved into a mocking expression of displeasure. "And they call *me* a fool."

What right do you have to gaze at me with such disappointment? she thought, bewildered. Almost as if he cared. As if he felt she'd made a terrible decision. Then the Fairy Queen's words sank in: *Adam*. "But wait—" Lisa began.

She never got to finish her sentence.

"Are you *the* Adam Black?" she yelled, flooded with murderous rage.

But it was too late. She was...

Falling...

Again...

* * *

Near the Ferh Bog, Circenn doubled over in his saddle and clutched his stomach. Deep rasping breaths exploded from his lungs and he stared into the night with dawning horror.

Galan and Duncan jerked to an immediate stop at his side.

"What is it? What is it, Circenn? Talk to me!" Duncan yelled. He'd never seen Circenn Brodie's face so anguished.

"She is gone," he whispered. "I cannot feel Lisa anymore."

"What does this mean?" Duncan asked swiftly. "Has she somehow returned to her time?"

Circenn's gaze was savage. "Either that—or Adam found her."

"Why didn't you give her the flask?" Duncan demanded. "Then this *couldn't* have happened!"

Circenn nearly lunged from his mount at Duncan. "You argued *against* it when last we spoke."

"But that was *before* Armand—"

"I didn't have *time*!" Circenn roared.

"You must go back."

"She's *gone*" Circenn said through tightly clenched teeth. "If she has left this century, it is too late for me to seek her. If Adam found her, it is too late for me to seek her. Doona you understand—it is one or the other, and either way it is already too late because she is *gone*"

He raised his hand and slapped Duncan's mount on the rump. "Now ride!" he commanded his troops. "Ride and avenge," he swore softly, knowing that every Englishman who fell beneath his ax or his sword would bear Adam's face.

CHAPTER 28

THE BATTLE NEAR THE STREAM FROM WHICH IT TOOK ITS name—the Bannock Burn—lasted only two days, but they were two glorious days that resonated throughout the country, from end to end.

Edward Plantagenet's troops assembled near the burn. They were boisterous, they outnumbered the Scots by five to one, and they were arrogantly certain that victory was scant hours away. They were mere miles from Stirling, they had a supreme advantage in numbers, and they still had two days to defeat the barbaric Scots.

Edward scoffed, joking with his men. It would take no more than two hours, he gloated.

The opposing troops engaged, and much to Edward's dismay, over the course of the next two hours a large number of the English fell prey to the Bruce's cleverly concealed pits and caltrops—spiked pieces of iron treacherously hidden in the brush.

Their confidence shaken by the concealed traps, they regrouped, having belatedly discovered that the Scottish front was virtually impenetrable.

Circling around to attack from the side would necessitate skirting the swampy Carse, while Scottish spearmen sat the high ground, waiting to pick them off.

Edward was chagrined by how well the Bruce had chosen his battle site, and how foolishly his troops had discounted the Scots' abilities. The end of the first day saw Edward's heavy horsemen repulsed twice, and large numbers of Englishmen slain.

The Bruce's camp retired to the fringes of the forest of the New Park that night, elated by their success in repelling the English troops.

The English camp made their second deadly mistake by taking refuge in the soggy ground between the burn and the River Forth, a tactical error that would call its due in the morning.

When Sir Alexander Seton, a Scottish knight in Edward's English army, defected

late the first night, advising all who would listen that the Scots would win on the morrow, and if they didn't he would willingly forfeit his own head, the English troops were further demoralized.

On the second day the English swiftly realized the error they'd made in choosing their campsite. The Scots descended upon them, trapping the English army immediately after their first charge, cornering them between the Bannock Burn and the River Forth, in a space too constricted for them to maneuver into formation for another charge.

The Scots had cunningly chosen their position, forcing the English to wage war on foot—a tactic for which they were grossly unprepared.

The Scots were far superior to the English on the ground, well accustomed to fighting in the swampy bogs and marshes, and free to move easily without the binding weight of armor.

The English began to break into unorganized formations, and it was at that weakened moment that the laird of Brodie arrived with his Templars. Into the fray they galloped as one, the holy knights ripping off their plaids, revealing the stark white robes and blood-red crosses of their Order.

Across the field of mud and broken bodies, the wave of brilliant white knights cut like a scythe of death. Many of the battle-weary, discouraged Englishmen simply turned and fled upon glimpsing the robes. The Templars were legendary for their invincibility in battle. Few encountered a warrior Templar and lived to tell of it. The Englishmen who were astute enough to notice that they rode into battle under the banner of the notorious laird of Brodie reared their mounts about and raced away from certain death.

Along the Bannock Burn, Circenn Brodie was an animal, merciless and swift. Later the men would claim he vied with the Berserkers in his deadly rage, and epics would be composed in his honor. He was cold and sharp and hard, and good for nothing but slaughter. He lost himself in a blackness so complete that he cared naught if he slew legions, he simply raged, hoping to exhaust himself and gain the respite of unconsciousness, a temporary kind of death.

When at last one of his lieutenants took the English king's mount by the bridle and rushed Edward from the battlefield in a blatant admission of defeat, a bellow

of triumph echoed across the bogs.

The English swiftly decamped and fled upon seeing Edward's standard leave the field, while the Scots roared their joy.

In the midst of the celebration, Circenn felt only a savage sorrow—it was finished too swiftly. One measly day of battle, and he had no choice but to face both his pain and his ancient enemy. A month-long war would have made him far happier.

While the men celebrated and paraded through the country proclaiming the English defeat, Circenn Brodie turned his mount and, without stopping to eat or rest, rode back to Castle Brodie to destroy his nemesis.

* * *

Circenn sensed Adam the moment he entered Castle Brodie.

While riding, he'd conceded the possibility that a natural disaster or an accident had befallen his beloved. But Adam's presence could mean only one thing: The fairy had found Lisa and discovered she'd brought the flask.

Either you do it, or I will, the blackest elf had insisted.

The blood roared in his ears, howling for recompense. He would be satisfied with nothing less than the immortal's death. Circenn belatedly understood that he should never have left her alone, even for a moment, no matter how safe he'd thought she was at Brodie. Although Adam had sworn never to come there without an invitation, apparently he thought as little of breaking vows as Circenn did.

Perhaps they truly *were* two of a kind, he thought bitterly. He berated himself endlessly on the ride back to Brodie. He should have stayed to comfort her, then this never would have happened. He should have slipped the immortality potion into her wine months ago, then this never would have happened. He should have explained to her that he could make her immortal. He should never have left her side, not even for a moment. Fighting in a battle now seemed as trivial as it truly was, measured against the loss of his love. He should have sent his Templars ahead without him—they would have won anyway.

He slammed his packs to the floor and stalked into the Greathall. He would die

inside later, after he'd taken action to ensure that the *sin siriche du* would never again manipulate another mortal.

Now he understood why his vision had shown him that he would soon be mad, for once he finished with Adam, his rage would dissipate and he would be consumed by bottomless grief. He would unravel and embrace insanity.

As Adam turned to greet him, Circenn raised a hand. "Stay right there. Doona move. Doona even speak to me," he gritted through clenched teeth, and loped up the stairs.

He snorted as he traversed the corridor. Adam was so arrogant that he failed to foresee what Circenn was about to do. Throwing back the door to his chambers, he kicked open the hidden room and swiftly unearthed the Sword of Light.

When he stalked back down to the Greathall, the sword swinging in his grip, Adam flinched.

"What do you plan to do with that, Circenn Brodie?" the fairy asked stiffly.

Circenn's gaze held no mercy. "Do you recall the vow I took over five hundred years ago?"

"Of course I do," Adam said irritably. "Now put that thing down."

Circenn continued as if Adam hadn't spoken. "I said: 'I will protect the hallows. I will never permit them to be used for mortal gain. I will never use them for my or Scotland's gain.' But most important *to you*, I swore that I would never permit the hallowed weapons to be used to destroy an immortal *Tuatha de Danaan*. He hefted the shimmering sword in one swift stroke. "I no longer believe in oaths, Adam. And I hold the means of your destruction. An oathless man could destroy your entire race, one by one."

"And then what would you have?" Adam countered. "You would be left alone. Besides, you don't know how to find the rest of my kind."

"I will find them. And once I have slain them all, I will impale myself upon your damned sword."

"It won't work. An immortal cannot kill himself, not even with the sacred

hallows."

"How do you know? Has one ever tried?"

"She is *not* dead," Adam snapped. "Quit being so melodramatic."

Circenn went very still. "I cannot feel her. She is dead to me."

"I assure you she is alive. I give you my word upon *myself*, since you think that is all I hold sacred. She is safe. She wished upon the mound, and it amused Aoibheal to appear and confer a boon upon her."

"Where is she?" he demanded. *She was alive*. Relief coursed through his body so strongly that he shuddered with the intensity of it. "And what did she wish?"

"She wished to go home," Adam said, more gently. "But she didn't really mean it, I was there. I've been stuck to Aoibheal's side for quite some time now, ever since she took my powers."

"Why did she take your powers?" Circenn was so stunned that Adam had been so harshly punished, that he was briefly sidetracked.

Adam looked abashed. "For interfering with you."

"Ah, there is some small justice in your world, after all," Circenn said dryly. "So, Lisa has returned to the twenty-first century?" He could endure seven hundred years of solitude to be with her again.

"No."

"What do you mean no? You said she wished to go back."

"She did. Sort of. She was very unresolved on that point. I could feel her indecision. So I neither complied nor failed to comply. Aoibheal gave me the order to 'send her.' I obeyed the gist of her command by sending her to a safe place, out of time, until you returned. That's why you cannot feel her. She is not... quite in this world."

"Where is she?" Circenn said through gritted teeth.

Adam cast him a mocking glance. "I knew better than to send her home. Had I

returned her to the future, you would have patiently sat on your disciplined warrior's ass and waited seven hundred years to see her again. So passive, so damned human. And then I wouldn't have gotten what I wanted."

"Where is she?" Circenn roared, swinging the sword.

Adam grinned.

* * *

Lisa kicked at the sand in disbelief.

She was on a tropical island.

"Un-bee-*leevable*," she muttered.

But it wasn't really, she amended. It was perfectly in keeping with the sorry state of her existence. Somewhere, God was convulsing with laughter, each time she zoomed around another blind curve along the mad course he'd mapped out for her life.

She gazed out over the ocean, breathing deeply. Despite her irritation, she adored the beach, had never gotten to spend much time at it, and couldn't help but greedily inhale the salt air.

Waves swept the sand gently. The sea was so beautiful that it was difficult to regard it for any protracted length of time. The water was unusual—a breathtaking, exotic aqua one glimpsed only inside the pages of misleading, photo-shop-enhanced travel brochures. It lapped at the perfect white beach with foamy tendrils.

Sparkling white froth, glittering white sand, endless expanse of aqua crystalline water.

She narrowed her eyes.

It was *too* perfect. Something was askew here. Even the air felt strange. It smelled... She sniffed cautiously.

Like Circenn.

How could an island smell like Circenn?

She felt a pain deep inside at the thought of him. First she'd had her mother, but no life. Then she'd had Circenn, but no mother. Now she had neither, and missed them both with the whole of her heart.

"What did I do to deserve this?" she demanded of the cloudless sky.

"As if there is anyone up there who cares," she heard someone say dryly. "Why do they always look *up* when they wax rhetoric? Better the creature should tithe to us."

She pivoted on the sand. Two utterly beautiful men stood on the beach, dressed in simple white robes. One was as dark as the other was fair, and both were regarding her with disdain.

The blond Adonis gestured to his companion. "How strange, for a moment I almost thought it heard me. It appears to be looking at us."

"Not possible. It can neither see nor hear us unless we permit it."

"I hate to burst your smug bubble, but I *do* see you and I *am* mortal. Are you more of those pernicious fairy-things?" she asked irritably. The hell with them. They were not going to manipulate her. Besides, how much worse could her life get?

"Fairy-things?" The blond one's eyes widened. "It called us a fairy-thing," he informed his companion. "It *sees* us. Do you think it may be one of those meddling mortals who see both worlds—the ones our Queen and King kidnap at birth?"

The dark one arched a brow. "Then where has it been since then? For it appears fully grown to me."

"I am not an 'it' and I *am* fully grown and I was *not* kidnapped at birth and I would appreciate it if you did not speak of me as if I didn't exist."

"Then how did you come to be here?"

"Where is here?" Lisa asked swiftly. She was going to assume control of events from moment one in this strange place.

"Morar. It is where the *Tuatha de Danaan* repaired after the Compact," the

Adonis said.

"Take me to your Queen," Lisa commanded imperiously.

They exchanged glances, then simply vanished.

Lisa's shoulders slumped. So much for imperial demeanor. She'd thought she'd sounded pretty regal.

She blew out a breath and started walking down the beach, determined to greet with aplomb whatever new phenomenon fate chose to spew from the ocean's teeth. A whale-sized piranha biking down the beach wouldn't have surprised her right now.

* * *

"Morar," Circenn repeated, his jaw tightening. "And why did you send her to the isle of your people?"

"To keep her out of time for a bit, while I awaited your return. To buy you time to make up your mind."

"Make up my mind about what?" Circenn asked icily.

"About what you wish to do with her."

"I doona need time to decide that: I want to marry her, I want her here, and I want her immortal. But I doona understand your motives. I thought you wanted her dead, Adam. Did you not force an oath from me—

"Never take anything I say or do at face value, Circenn. It was never about that. You needed to break some of your ridiculous rules. I merely put you in a position where you would be forced to question them. Had you truly killed her, I would have been vastly disappointed. You never understood what I was really after."

Circenn shook his head, muttering beneath his breath. All his angst about breaking the vow had been for naught, because Adam had never wished it fulfilled to begin with. "And I doona understand now, so why not explain it to me?"

Adam circled around him, studying him. "Why don't you put down that sword?" He shuddered. "We gave it to you so we wouldn't be tempted to fight among our

own kind. We trusted you."

"You coerced me into the guardianship and well you know it," he said bitterly. Still, he let the tip dip toward the floor, although he kept his hand firmly on the hilt.

Adam relaxed. "The way I see it, you have several choices. You can go join her where she is. In my world," he added smugly. "Or you may bring her back here. Or you may go fix her future and then send her back. She is safely out of time while you decide."

"Why do you mock me, Adam? You know I doona know how to accomplish any of those things. Are you offering to perform such magic for me?"

Adam looked pained. "I cannot. Aoibheal has clipped my wings, so to speak."

"Then exactly how do you expect me to dart about through time? Morar is not accessible by mortal means. You have trapped my woman on a fairy isle to which I have no means of traveling," he said, growing angry again.

Adam eyed Circenn challengingly. "Yes, you do."

Circenn flung a hand up in the air. "I cannot sift time—if I could, I would have offered to return her when I discovered what she'd lost and how much it pained her."

"You *can* sift time. You know that. You know also that there was a time recently when you would have given anything to have long ago accepted my lessons. You refused to let me teach you, but you know you have the power—it seethes within you. It begs to be freed. You would learn quickly. It would take me mere days to teach you how to sift time. We can practice with short jaunts."

Circenn regarded him, saying nothing. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Circenn, I have been telling you for five hundred years that I can teach you how to move through time and place. You have always sneered and walked away. Now I offer again: I can teach you how to sift time, weave worlds, how to change her future so her parents don't die. I can teach you enough that you can prevent the car wreck, perhaps even prevent the cancer, and return her to her future with her memory of you intact. When it is done you may join her there, or

bring her back. Or split your lives between the two places. You can do *anything* you want, Circenn Brodie. I've always told you this."

"And what price for such knowledge, Adam? What price for my woman back?"

"Oh, it's so simple," Adam said gently. "It's all I have ever wanted, all along." He nodded encouragingly. "You know what I want. I offer you a trade. Let me teach you. Let me take you where you belong. Let me show you my world. It is *not* evil."

Circenn grunted and rubbed his eyes. Five hundred years ago he'd sworn to avoid this moment at all costs. Throughout the centuries Adam had tempted him repeatedly with anything he could think of, and failed each time. Apparently Adam had realized that the trap would have to be more cunningly laid, and this one had succeeded brilliantly. That which Circenn had refused for five centuries had now become inevitable. The ninth-century man within him shrugged, stepped down, and ceded defeat. Was it evil? Were Adam and his race evil? Or had Circenn simply never forgiven Adam for slights inflicted long ago?

His choices were painfully simple: Be with Lisa, or not be with Lisa.

The latter was unacceptable, and Adam knew that. Circenn felt bitterly manipulated by Adam, and anger burned within him. This situation had been designed and orchestrated by Adam Black from the onset.

But then he thought of Lisa. What existed between them had nothing to do with Adam. Adam may have cleverly manipulated events, but Circenn alone had fallen in love with Lisa. He would have loved her no matter where he'd found her. His anger melted away.

If he accepted what Adam was offering, he could change her life: He could slip to the future and save her parents and return to her everything she'd ever wanted, and be with her again. And hadn't he been toying with that idea for some time now? When he'd asked her to tell him everything about her life, when he'd listened and taken mental notes—aye, even then he'd been analyzing possibilities in the back of his mind. His bitterness over Adam's making him immortal five hundred years past had caused him to violently reject everything about the *Tuatha de Danaan*. But perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all.

He knew she loved him. Since he had to accept Adam's lessons, if only to rescue her from the fairy isle, why not go all the way? Why not perfect her world and give her *all* her heart's desires? What a gift, to be so powerful that he could ensure her wildest dreams. What else might he be able to give her?

Everything, Adam said wordlessly.

Circenn glanced at Adam.

Dare he brave her time? Dare he go forward and love her there?

He would love her anywhere.

Dare he give Adam what he wanted?

Circenn Brodie drew a deep breath and regarded the blackest elf. He saw before him the potential for corruption, unlimited power, terrifying freedom.

Perhaps he saw a bit of himself in those dark eyes.

"It's so easy," Adam assured him. "It won't hurt a bit, once you've said it for the first time. You'll find it feels quite natural after a while."

Circenn nodded. "Then teach me. Teach me everything you know... Father."

SOARING...

*So sweet a kiss yestreen frae thee I reft,
In bowing down thy body on the bed,
That even my life within thy lips I left.
Sensyne (since then) from thee my spirits
wald never shed.*

—To His Mistress/Alexander Montgomerie

CHAPTER 29

"DOONA THINK THIS MEANS I FORGIVE YOU FOR seducing my mother," Circenn said later.

"I didn't ask you to," Adam said with a chiding, paternal expression that made Circenn uncomfortable. "She was irresistible, you know. Rarely has one of our kind successfully bred with a mortal, and had the child survive to maturity. But you Brudes have such life force that it was possible, as I'd suspected when I seduced her."

"You destroyed my father."

"His own jealousy destroyed him. I did not raise a hand against him. And that man had nothing to do with siring you. You are my son, and mine only. No seed of his made you. When Morganna died, I refused to lose you, too."

"So you made me immortal. I hated you for that."

"I know that."

The two men were silent for a time.

"Is it truly possible to alter her future and return her to a better one?" Circenn asked.

"Yes. We will go to her future and change it, twice. Actually," he amended, "we will likely need many trips to her time to get it right. Then we will go to Morar, and we will send her on to the new future."

"But won't she have lived portions of it twice?"

"She will have the equivalent of five years of dual memory."

"Will it damage her mind?"

"Lisa? Need you ask that? The woman is nearly Brude."

Circenn felt a flash of pride. "Aye, that she is." He was silent for a moment. "But I doona understand how to do it."

"Patience. You've been a quick study on your own, you know. I've watched you. I know you use heightened speed, I know you scry, I know you've altered space around you without even being aware of it. We will proceed slowly."

"Slowly is good," Circenn said. "My head pounds with too many strange concepts."

"We will move at a snail's pace," Adam assured him. "There is much to be learned about our kind, Circenn, but you must learn it in stages. The madness doesn't result from immortality. It is an annoying and temporary side effect of our far-vision. We see how everything interconnects, and if you seek that knowledge too quickly, it can make you lose perspective, even cause madness."

"Someday I will be able to see those things too?"

"Yes. I learned too quickly, arrogantly certain that nothing could ever harm me. When the understanding came, it overwhelmed me just as Aoibheal had warned it would. But I will bring you to the knowledge of our race slowly enough that you can absorb it while learning it."

"Adam—the spear," Circenn said hesitantly.

"What of it?" Adam replied, a hint of amusement curving his lip.

"The spear and the sword are the only weapons that can kill immortals. The spear was used to wound Christ."

"You're beginning to see connections. Keep looking."

"But what—"

"You will find your own way. These are the things that must come slowly. You cannot expect to overthrow too quickly everything you've thought was true. You are still a ninth-century man in many ways. There will be plenty of time to talk of these things later. For now, let us concentrate on Lisa, and you discovering who and what you are. This is all I ever wanted from the beginning, Circenn—for you to accept that I am your father and be willing to learn about your heritage. I am the only *Tuatha de Danaan* who has a full-grown son," he added smugly. "Some of them resent me for it."

Circenn rolled his eyes, and Adam, caught up in adoring himself, ignored it.

"I can teach you to sift time, but a fuller understanding of your abilities will not come for many years. Are you certain you wish to proceed? I will not have you later cry foul and be angry with me again. Five hundred years of your bad temper is all I can stand."

"I am certain. Teach me."

"Come." Adam extended his hand. "Let us begin and regain your mate. Welcome to my world, son."

* * *

Circenn's instruction at Adam's hands commenced the next morning, and the laird of Brodie began slowly to understand what he'd always sensed within him, and feared: the potential for unlimited power. He began to see why it had frightened him, he—a warrior who feared nothing. Such power was terrifying because the ability to use it carried immense responsibilities. What had once seemed a vast unexplored wilderness—his country, Scotland—was now put into astonishing perspective.

There were other worlds, far beyond the one they inhabited. He realized why the *Tuatha de Danaan* seemed detached to mortals. The tiny bit of land called Scotland and their tiny war for independence was one of millions in the universe.

Over the next few days of learning just a tiny bit about himself, he began to develop (loath though he was to admit it) some respect for the man who had sired him. Adam was indeed given to strange amusements, prone to meddle and to be prankish. However, considering the extent of what his "blackest elf" could actually do, Circenn realized that Adam generally exercised admirable restraint. He also began to realize how mortals, who had no such magic, could so gravely misunderstand those who wielded it.

He eyed his father, who was bent over an ancient tome from which he'd been reading aloud, giving Circenn more background on his race. It was difficult to conceive of the exotic man as his father, for Adam wore his customary glamour that made him seem even younger than Circenn.

"Adam, what of this bond I have with her? What happened that night when she

and I..."

"Made love? Ah, tupp'd as Duncan would say." Adam raised his head from the book. "What did Morganna tell you when you were a lad?"

"About what? She told me many things." Circenn shrugged.

"What did she tell you about spilling your seed in a woman?" Adam asked, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, *that*. She told me it would fall off," Circenn muttered darkly.

Adam tossed back his head, shaking with mirth. "That is exactly something Morganna would have said. She knew better than to reason with the stubborn boy you were. And did you ever spill in a woman?"

"Nay. At first I believed her and feared it would indeed fall off. Then, when I was old enough to realize she'd been jesting with me, I didn't because I didn't wish to scatter my bastards across the land. Finally, when I wed Naya and was ready to have a family, I discovered what you had done—

"I told you the same day, didn't I? I knew you would plan children."

"You told me to prevent me?" Circenn said, startled.

"Of course. I knew what would happen if you did. You would have been bound to a woman you did not love, and that is the purest hell for us."

"So spilling my seed in a woman links us?"

"It seems to be a side effect of our immortality. Our life force is so strong, so potent, that when we find our release inside a mortal woman the union that is forged connects us. And that link will soon include your child."

"Lisa's not pregnant," Circenn said quickly.

Adam glanced at him mockingly. "Of course she is. You—half-fae and half-mortal—are much more virile than we are. You might be our hope for the future."

"Lisa is carrying my child?" Circenn roared.

"Yes, from the moment you spent your seed, the first time you made love to her."

Circenn was stuck silent.

"The first seven months are splendid. It's amazing when the child's force starts to mingle with yours and hers. You feel the babe's awakening, its excitement, and burgeoning life. You marvel at what you have created, you hunger to see it arrive. Then the last two months become hellish. You, Circenn, were a pain in the ass. You wanted out, you kicked and brooded and argued, and suddenly I developed cravings for ridiculous foods I'd never wanted before, and ah—the birth, sweet Dagda! I suffered her labor. I felt the pain, and I felt the creation, the wonder. By the time you birth your first child, you and Lisa will be so deeply bound you won't be able to imagine breathing without her."

Circenn was silent, awed by the thought of Lisa's pregnancy and what was to come. Then the enormity of what Adam had just admitted struck him. "You had such a bond with my mother?"

"I am not without emotion, Circenn," Adam replied stiffly. "I endeavor to keep it still."

"But she died."

"Yes," Adam said. "And I ran to the farthest ends of the earth trying not to feel her death. But I couldn't escape it. Even on Morar, even on other worlds, I felt her dying."

"Why did you *let* her?"

Adam gave him a black look. "At least now that you understand that what I had with Morganna is what you have with Lisa, imagine what I endured permitting her to die. Perhaps you can find it within you to be less harsh in your judgment of me."

"But why did you let her?" Circenn repeated.

Adam shook his head. "My life with Morganna is another story and we have no time for it now."

Circenn studied the exotic man, who would no longer meet his gaze. Permit Lisa

to die? Never. "But you *could* have made her immortal?" he pressed, with a sense of desperation.

Adam's jaw was rigid. He shot Circenn a furious gaze. "She wouldn't accept it. Now leave it."

Circenn closed his eyes. Why had his mother refused the potion if Adam had offered it? Would Lisa refuse?

He would not allow her to do so, he resolved. Never would he permit her to die. Gone were the vague feelings of guilt for his thoughts of making her immortal. After what Adam had just told him, he knew he could never endure losing the union they shared. A child! She carried his babe, and the bond would swell to include their son or daughter.

Live through Lisa's death? No. But in recompense for taking her mortality he would give her the perfect future with her family. It would be his way of making amends.

* * *

Circenn materialized at dawn on the day of her graduation. Swiftly he scaled the wall surrounding the Stone estate. Swiftly he punctured the wheels on the small machine to prevent it from moving. Then he regarded the bigger machine irritably. *Which one is a Mercedes?* he wondered with a scowl. Moving quickly, he punctured those wheels, too. But what if they changed the wheels? What if they had new wheels somewhere in their keep?

He glared at the keep, then he glowered at the machines for a long moment, holding them personally responsible for hurting his woman. He struggled against an intense desire to creep into the home and peer down at the sleeping eighteen-year-old Lisa he hadn't yet met.

"Stay away from her. You are so dense sometimes, Circenn," Adam's bodiless voice mocked. "You still don't understand the power you have. Why are you trying to harm the machines, when you can simply make them go away? For that matter, why did you appear outside the gate and climb the wall, when you might have appeared within the gates?"

Circenn frowned. "I am unaccustomed to this power. And where would I send

them?"

"Send them to Morar. That should be interesting." Adam laughed.

Circenn shrugged and focused his newfound center of power. He closed his eyes and visualized the silica sands of Morar. With a small nudge, the machines disappeared.

If they landed on the isle of Morar with a soft *woosh* of white silica sand, only one mortal was there to see it, and she hadn't been surprised by anything in quite some time.

* * *

"Our cars have been stolen!" Catherine exclaimed.

Jack peered over his newspaper. "Did you look for them?" he asked absently, as if a Mercedes and a Jeep could be overlooked.

"Of course I did, Jack," Catherine said. "How are we going to get to Lisa's graduation? We can't miss her big day!"

* * *

Circenn tugged the cap low on Adam's forehead, stepped back, and grinned. "Perfect."

"I don't see why *I* have to do this."

"I doona wish to risk being seen, nor dare I trust myself to see her. I doona know that I could restrain myself, so you must do it."

"This uniform is ridiculous." Adam tugged at the crotch. "It's too small."

"Then make it bigger, O powerful one," Circenn said dryly. "Quit procrastinating and call their number. Tell them the cab is on the way."

"But they didn't call for one."

"I'm counting on whoever answers to think someone else must have."

Adam arched a brow. "You're good at this."

"Call."

Sure enough, Catherine assumed that Jack had called and ordered a cab to arrive at precisely 9:00 A.M. When it appeared, Jack assumed that Catherine had called. In the fuss over filing stolen-car reports with the police and the insurance company, neither thought to ask the other.

* * *

"What's next?" Adam asked, rubbing his hands.

Circenn shot him a dark look. "You seem to be enjoying this."

Adam shrugged. "I have never before manipulated in such fine detail. It's quite fascinating."

"Cancer. She said her mother was dying of cancer," Circenn said. "We doona even know what kind. I suspect this is not going to be as simple as making two machines disappear. We must find a way to prevent her from catching this disease, and from what I've read, they doona seem to know what causes it. I've been flipping through these books all night." He gestured to the medical books scattered across his desk in the study at Castle Brodie.

Adam picked up several and scanned them. THE CINCINNATI PUBLIC LIBRARY was stamped on the spine. "You pilfered from the library?" Adam said with mock dismay.

"I had to. I tried to borrow them but they wanted papers I didn't have. So I went back when they were closed, and a security guard—they protect their books even in the future—nearly attacked me before I'd finished finding what I wanted." He sighed. "But I'm no closer to discovering how to prevent the disease. I must know what type of cancer she had."

Adam thought for a moment. "Are you up to some more nocturnal raiding? I believe there are no more than a half-dozen hospitals in her city."

"Hospitals?" Circenn's brow furrowed.

"You really are a medieval brute. Hospitals are where they treat the ill. We will go to her time and steal her records. Come. Sift time, and I will be your faithful guide."

* * *

"She has cervical cancer," Circenn said softly, glancing over his shoulder at Adam, who was reclining on the desk in a private office at Good Samaritan Hospital. "Listen to this: The diagnosis was severe dysplasia. Over time it became advanced invasive cancer. They refer to something called *cervical intraepithelial neoplasia*" His tongue felt thick over the strange words, and he pronounced them very slowly. "The notes indicate Catherine might have been diagnosed in time to prevent the cancer had she had something called a Pap test. The notes indicate that Catherine told the doctor her last Pap test was eight years before they diagnosed the cancer. It seems cervical cancer is caused by a type of virus that is easily treated in the early stages."

Adam fanned rapidly through the textbook he had plucked off the desk. Locating an applicable entry, he read aloud: " 'Pap screening test: a cancer screening test developed in 1943 by Dr. George Papanicolaou. The Pap test examines cells from the cervix, or the mouth of the womb, located at the top of the vagina.' " Adam was silent for a long moment. "It says a woman should have a Pap test annually. Why didn't she?"

Circenn shrugged. "I doona know. But it sounds as if we go back a few years, we should be able to prevent it."

Adam arched a brow. "How can we fix this? Just how do you intend to get a woman who obviously hates to go to the doctor to go see the doctor?"

Circenn grinned. "A little gentle persuasion."

* * *

Catherine thumbed through the mail, hunting for a letter from her friend Sarah, who was in England for the summer. She tossed aside two fliers, snorting indelicately. Recently she'd been receiving a rash of junk mail dealing with one thing—gynecologists and cervical cancer.

Have you had your Pap smear this year? one banner screamed.

Cervical Cancer is preventable! a bright pink flier exclaimed.

They were all from a nonprofit organization she'd never heard of. Apparently some do-gooder who had money to burn. She tossed them in the wastebasket and resumed flipping through the mail.

But something nagged at her, so she retrieved the last flier. She must have received fifty of those things over the past month, and each time she threw one away, she felt a peculiar sense of déjà vu. She'd even received a call from a doctor's office this week, offering a free exam. She had never heard of any doctor offering free Pap tests before.

When was my last checkup? she wondered, fingering the flier. At nearly sixteen, Lisa was ready to start having annual checkups. It might be a bit difficult to persuade her daughter to have her first visit when Catherine wasn't faithful about making and keeping her own appointments. She regarded the pamphlet thoughtfully. It said that cancer of the cervix was preventable—that a routine Pap smear could detect many abnormalities. And that women in all age groups were at risk.

Decisively, she plunked down the pamphlet and called her gynecologist to schedule appointments for herself and Lisa. Sometimes she and Jack tended to be irresponsible about things like checkups and life insurance and servicing the cars. She'd not seen her gynecologist because she felt perfectly fine. But that was like saying the car didn't need service because it was running perfectly fine. Maintenance was different from repairs. *Preventive medicine can save your life*, the pamphlet said.

Life was good, and Catherine certainly didn't want to miss one moment of Lisa's growing up. She had grandchildren to look forward to one day.

Perhaps she should have Jack look into some life insurance, while she was at it.

CHAPTER 30

"YOU ARE CERTAIN THIS WILL WORK?" CIRCENN worried.

"Yes. We will remove her from Morar while she sleeps and return her to her new future. I've done this before; however, this is the only time I have allowed the person to retain dual memories. Are you certain you wish her to recall the other reality? The one where her father died and her mother is ill?"

"Yes. If we take it from her she will not know me. She will have no memory of our time together. Without those memories she would be a different person, and I love her precisely the way she is."

"Then let's do it," Adam said. "She will be very confused at first. You will need to get to her quickly, to help her understand. Once she has been returned, race to her side. She'll need you."

* * *

Lisa was drifting when she heard the voices.

"You must do it *now*, Circenn."

Circenn, my love, her dreaming mind purred.

I'm coming, Lisa.

* * *

Lisa woke from a sleep that felt drugged. Her pillow smelled funny. She sniffed it: jasmine and sandalwood. The scent brought tears to her eyes; it reminded her of Circenn, the way the faint smell had always seemed part of his skin. Another scent overpowered it swiftly: frying bacon. She kept her eyes closed and puzzled over that thought. Where was she? Had she stumbled down the beach and in her delirium found a house and a bed?

She opened her eyes cautiously.

She looked about the room, seeking traces of the fourteenth century—her first thought was that she'd blessedly traveled back to Circenn. But as her gaze skimmed again over the pale blue walls, her heart thudded painfully—she

recognized this room, and had thought to never see it again.

She dropped her disbelieving gaze to the bed *in* which she lay. A four-poster of blond wood with a frothy white canopy, she'd adored this bed in their home in Indian Hill, a lifetime ago.

She shot straight up in bed, trembling violently.

Had she finally, irrevocably lost her mind?

"M-Mom?" she called, knowing full well no one was going to answer her. And because no one would answer her she felt safe tossing her head back and wailing it.

"Mom!"

She heard the rush of feet on the stairs, and held her breath as the door opened. It seemed to inch inward in slow motion, as if she were watching a movie and the door opened frame by frame. Her heart tightened painfully when Catherine stepped in, a spatula in her hand, her brows drawn together in an expression of concern.

"What is it, Lisa? Did you have a bad dream, darling?"

Lisa swallowed, unable to speak. Her mother looked precisely as she would have looked had the car accident never happened, had the cancer never taken her. Eyes wide, she feasted on the impossible vision.

"Mom," she croaked.

Catherine looked at her expectantly.

"Is, um... D-Daddy here?" Lisa asked faintly, struggling to comprehend this new "reality."

"Of course not, sleepy-head. You know he leaves for work at seven. Are you hungry?"

Lisa stared. *Of course not, sleepy-head.* So normal, so routine, as if Catherine and Lisa had never been separated. As if Daddy had always been alive and the tragic past that had torn their family apart had never happened.

"What year is it?" she managed.

Her mother laughed. "Lisa!" She reached out a hand and tousled her hair. "It must have been quite a dream."

Lisa narrowed her eyes, thinking hard.

Downstairs, the doorbell chimed, and Catherine turned toward the sound. "Who could that be this early?" She glanced back at Lisa. "Come down for breakfast, darling. I made your favorite. Poached eggs, bacon, and toast."

Lisa watched her mom leave the room, stunned. She fought the urge to leap from her bed, wrap her arms around her mother's departing knees, and hang on for dear life. Her mother's knees were unscarred and strong. Joy flooded her. She must have died, she decided, on that strange beach in the stranger land. Was this heaven?

She'd take it—whatever it was.

Snatches of conversation floated up from the foyer. She tuned them out, studying her room. She'd kept a calendar on her desk and was itching to know "when" she was now, but before she could move, her mother called up.

"Lisa, darling, come down. You have a guest. He says he's a friend of yours from the university." Her mother's voice sounded excited and oh-so-approving.

University? She was in college? Oh, this *was* heaven. Now all she needed was Circenn to make it complete.

Lisa leaped from the bed, tugged on her favorite white fluffy robe (astonishing that it was hanging right on her bedpost where she'd always hung it!) and hurried down the stairs, wondering who could possibly be calling for her. As she rounded the curved staircase, her heart thumped hard in her chest.

Circenn Brodie arched a brow and smiled. Simultaneously, a wave of love hit her, sent along their special bond.

Lisa nearly whimpered, overwhelmed with pleasure, disbelief, and confusion. He was wearing charcoal trousers and a black silk polo shirt that rippled across his muscular chest, from which he was dusting a light misting of rain. His hair

had been trimmed and was pulled back in a leather thong. Expensive Italian boots made her blink and shake her head. She'd never seen him in such fitted clothing and could only imagine the stir he must have caused strolling around in the twenty-first century. Clothing didn't make this man, *he* made the clothing, molding it with his powerful body; six feet seven inches of rippling brawn. She briefly envisioned him in a pair of faded jeans and nearly swooned.

"Mrs. Stone, would you mind terribly if I took your daughter out to breakfast? We have some catching up to do."

Catherine eyed the magnificent man standing in the doorway. "No, not at all. Why don't just come in and have some coffee while Lisa gets dressed," she invited graciously.

"Wear jeans, lass." Circenn said, his gaze intense. "And your 'you-knows,' " he added in a voice roughened by desire.

Catherine glanced back and forth between them, taking in the tender, passionate look from the tall, elegant man in the doorway and the startled yet dreamy expression on Lisa's face. She wondered why Lisa had hidden the fact that she was in love, and from her own mother, at that. Not once had Lisa mentioned a boyfriend, but Catherine decided that perhaps she hadn't spoken of it because it was the "real thing." When Catherine had first met Jack, she'd told no one about him; she'd felt that talking about it might somehow debase the private sanctity of their bond.

Lisa still hadn't moved from the base of the steps. She couldn't breathe; she was riveted by him. How had this come to pass? How was Circenn Brodie standing in the doorway of her Indian Hill home, talking to her living, healthy mother, while her living, healthy father was at work, when she'd left him seven hundred years in the past?

The dream flooded back over her: *We must do it now.*

"*What* did you do?" she asked weakly.

"What did he do about what, Lisa?" Catherine asked curiously.

"We have much to discuss, lass," he said tenderly.

"Is that a brogue I detect?" Catherine exclaimed. "I've always thought Scotland was such a romantic country. Jack and I have been discussing going for summer vacation this year."

Circenn moved to Catherine, raised her hand to his lips, and brushed her knuckles with a kiss. "Perhaps you could visit my home when you come," he said. "I would be pleased to welcome Lisa's parents into my keep."

Lisa had never seen Catherine so flustered. "Keep?" she exclaimed. "Don't tell me you have a castle. Oh! I'll just get that coffee," she said with a breathless laugh. As she turned toward the kitchen, she glanced back at her daughter, who was still standing frozen at the foot of the stairs.

"Lisa, did you hear him? He wants to take you to breakfast, although the way he's dressed, I'm not certain jeans would be appropriate, darling. Perhaps the beige dress with those strappy sandals I like so much."

Lisa nodded stupidly, just to get her mother out of the room. Then she realized that she was encouraging her healthy mother to leave the room. She flung a startled look at Circenn and mouthed, *Just a minute*, don't *move*, then flew across the foyer, catching up with her mother as she entered the hall.

"Wait!" she cried.

Catherine turned around and looked at her quizzically. "You're acting very odd today, Lisa." She smiled, leaned near to Lisa's ear, and whispered. "I like him. Oh my! Why didn't you *tell* me about him?"

Lisa threw her arms around Catherine. "I love you, Mom," she said fiercely.

Catherine gave a startled and pleased little laugh—just the kind of half-breathless sound of joy Lisa remembered from before Jack had died, in the other reality.

"I don't know what this is all about, Lisa, but I love you too, darling. Only tell me your next words aren't going to be 'and I'm sorry but I'm pregnant and running off to get married,' " she teased. "I'm not ready for an empty nest."

Lisa's hand flew to her abdomen and her eyes widened. "Uh... Oh! I should get dressed." Leaving her mother with raised brows and a very intrigued expression

on her face, Lisa fled the hallway before she could think much harder about the possibility her mother had raised.

CHAPTER 31

LISA GLANCED AROUND THE SUITE, BEVILDERED. AFTER she had slipped on lacy you-knows, jeans, and a blouse, Circenn had efficiently navigated traffic and driven them downtown to The Cincinnati, where he'd reserved a suite. She was stunned by how capable he was, how quickly he'd adapted to and taken control of her modern-day world. But then she remembered that the man was a born conqueror and warrior, and the twenty-first century, while overwhelming, was just one more challenge for him, and he would master it with the same aplomb as he'd mastered his own century.

He'd explained a bit on the ride there, and gravely informed her that he forgave her for leaving him, although his lower lip had been set at such an angle that she'd known his feelings had been hurt.

He'd also explained that they'd kept her on the isle of Morar while he and Adam had changed her future, and filled her in on how they'd prevented the car wreck and the cancer.

"But I thought you hated Adam."

Circenn sighed as he popped open a bottle of champagne and poured two glasses. Dropping onto the bed, he gave her a guilty look and patted the bed beside him.

He opened his arms. "Come. I need you, lass," he whispered before closing his mouth over hers. Then he proceeded to show her how very much he needed her.

Clothing fell swiftly away as they undressed each other urgently. When she was clad in nothing but a lacy pale pink bra and panties, he lifted her high in his arms above him and fell back onto the bed. Lisa sat astride him and ran her hands over his muscled chest, following the trail of silky dark hair with a feather-light finger.

Slipping the strap of her bra down, he groaned softly. "I love these lacy things."

Lisa laughed and dropped her head forward so that her hair curtained his face. "I love *you*."

"I know," her said smugly. And for a few moments she was lost in a wave of passion and tenderness and love that surged silently along their unique bond.

Never leave me, lass, you are the one and only, forever.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Did you hear me?" With lazy sensuality, he dragged his tongue over the peak of her nipple through the thin silk of her bra. It crested eagerly.

"Words! I heard you in words!"

"Mmm," he murmured, nipping gently at the buds he'd teased beneath the silk. With a quick snap her bra was off, and he cupped her breasts in his hands, brushing the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. *Will you love me forever?* He caught a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, tugging gently.

Lisa shook her head, trying to clear it. Even after all the times she'd made love with him, she still couldn't think clearly when he was touching her. "What are you saying?"

That I need you forever, Lisa Brodie. Wed me and have babies with me and give me forever.

"Lisa Brodie?" she squeaked.

You doona think I'd leave you in shame, do you? Be my wife. I promise you will want for naught. He slipped his hands inside her panties and cupped her bottom. His gaze was fixed on her abdomen, as if he were trying to see inside her. Her hand flew to her stomach.

"Do you know something I don't know?" she asked suspiciously.

Just that you've already done one of the three things I am asking you to do.

"I'm pregnant? I'm going to have your baby?" she exclaimed, a shiver of delight racing up her spine.

Our baby. Yes, lass, he already grows within you and he will be very... special. Marry me, love.

"Yes," she said. "Oh yes yes yes, Circenn!"

I am the luckiest man in the world.

"Yes," Lisa agreed, then thought no more for a long time.

* * *

Afterward, they showered together, slipping and sliding in the huge marble shower that had six spouts, three on each wall. Circenn indulged with the unfettered pleasure of a fourteenth-century barbarian who'd never seen a shower before, standing in the streams of the water, shaking his head and spraying it everywhere. They made love on the marble floor, in the corner against the wall, and in the Jacuzzi. Lisa, wrapped in a fluffy white robe, was toweling her hair dry when she heard Circenn yelling in the bedroom.

Startled, she slipped from the bathroom only to discover Circenn standing nude in front of the TV, roaring at it.

"William Wallace did *not* look like that!" He gestured irritably at the TV

Lisa laughed, as she realized he was pointing at a blue-faced Mel Gibson, storming into battle in *Braveheart*.

"And Robert doona look like that!" he complained.

"Perhaps you should try writing a script yourself," she teased.

"They'd never believe it. It is obvious your time has no idea what my time was really like."

"Speaking of your time and my time, where—or should I say when—will we live, Circenn?"

Circenn pressed the Off button on the remote control like a pro, and turned to her. "Any place you wish, Lisa. We can spend six months in my time and six months here, or go week to week. I know you wish to be near your family. We could take them back too."

Lisa's eyes grew wide. "We could? We could take my mom and dad to your time?"

"How would you like to be married in a fourteenth-century ceremony with your mother and father in attendance? Your father may bequeath you to me, and I in turn will grant him a handsome manor, should your parents choose to retire there. Of course Robert, Duncan, and Galan will insist upon being present as well—I'm afraid it may turn into quite a spectacle."

Lisa couldn't stop smiling. "I would love that! A fairytale wedding."

"Provided we are cautious not to change too many things, I see no problem arranging it. I'm beginning to understand what Adam meant when he said if one looks down the timeline, one can discern which things are irrevocable and should not be manipulated, and which things will make little difference."

"Adam," Lisa said hesitantly. She hadn't forgotten for a moment that Circenn hadn't answered her earlier question.

"Yes," a voice said behind her, as Adam materialized in their suite. He grinned at Circenn. "So you finally got around to asking her to marry you. I was beginning to despair. Every time I tried to pop in, the two of you were..."

She spun around. "You!"

Adam grinned puckishly, turned into Eirren, then turned back into Adam. Lisa was speechless. But only for a moment.

She advanced on him. "You saw me in my bath!"

"What?" Circenn thundered.

"He visited me the whole time I was in your century," she clarified.

Circenn glared at his father. "Did you?"

Adam shrugged, the cameo of innocence. "I was concerned you might not be treating her well enough and checked in from time to time. You should be grateful that I decided upon full disclosure—I had considered just telling her that Eirren had run off, when she got around to asking about him. But I've decided to try to be a new person henceforth, at least around you and Lisa."

"Why do you put up with him?" Lisa said, shaking her head.

"Lisa, it's all right," Circenn said, moving swiftly to her side. "It's not what you think." He scowled at Adam. "Doona think I've forgotten you saw her in her bath. We will speak of it later, the three of us, and have the whole story out. But how did you come here by yourself? Has Aoibheal forgiven you?"

Adam preened, casting his silky dark hair over his shoulder. "Of course. I am once again all-powerful."

"Why are you being nice to him?" Lisa snapped.

"Lass, he helped me do all that I've done."

"He made you immortal!"

"And if he hadn't, I never would have met you, but would have died over a thousand years before you were born. He helped save your mother and father. And... Adam is... my father."

"Your *father*!" She gaped for a moment, as the information sunk in. Heavens, but there was obviously a great deal she still didn't know about Circenn Brodie. But she was more than willing to learn.

Circenn guided her to a chair and sat her down, then the two men took turns filling in her gaps of knowledge regarding the man who would be her husband. And once she knew, it made perfect sense, and explained everything: his unusual powers, his resentment toward Adam, Adam's unwillingness to let his son die.

A few moments of silence passed while she pondered all they'd told her, then she realized they were both watching her intently, and it seemed that they were waiting for something.

Adam moved to her side and reached in his pocket, and Lisa watched curiously, wondering what new thing they were going to spring on her next.

"You know now that I am half-fairy, Lisa," Circenn said gently. "Can you accept that?"

Lisa stood on her tiptoes and kissed him full on the lips. *Yes*, she assured him.

No regrets?

No regrets.

When Adam withdrew a shimmering flask and a pair of goblets, and poured three drops of glowing liquid into one of the glasses, Lisa scarcely breathed.

She watched in silence as Adam passed the glasses of champagne to Circenn, who—with great deliberation—offered Lisa the glass with the potion in it.

He regarded her gravely, then gave her a tender smile.

Love me forever, lass.

Lisa looked deep into his eyes.

Live with me forever. Cease my endless solitude. I will cherish you. I will show you worlds you've only dreamed of. I will walk beside you, hand in hand, until the end of days.

Lisa reached for the goblet.

Champagne had never tasted sweeter.

Kiss of the Highlander

Karen Marie Moning

*"I cannot believe God plays dice
with the Cosmos."*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

*"God not only plays dice.
He sometimes throws the dice where they
cannot be seen."*

—STEPHEN HAWKING

*HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND
1518*

Prologue

"The MacKeltar is a dangerous man, Nevin."

"What are you going on about this time, Mother?" Nevin looked out the window and watched the grass rippling in the early morning sun beyond their hut. His mother was reading fortunes, and were he foolish enough to turn around and meet Besseta's gaze, she would interpret it as encouragement, and he would be lured into yet another conversation about some bewildering prediction. His mother's wits, never the sharpest blade in the armory, were dulling daily, eroded by suspicious imaginings.

"My yew sticks have warned me that the laird presents a grave danger to you."

"The laird? Drustan MacKeltar?" Startled, Nevin glanced over his shoulder. Tucked behind the table near the hearth, his mother straightened in her chair, preening beneath his attention. Now he'd done it, he thought with an inward sigh. He'd gotten himself snagged in her conversation as securely as he'd gotten his long robes entangled in a thorny bramble a time or two, and it would require finesse to detach himself now without things degenerating into an age-old argument.

Besseta Alexander had lost so much in her life that she clung too fiercely to what she had left—Nevin. He repressed a desire to fling back the door and flee into the serenity of the Highland morning, aware that she would only corner him again at the earliest opportunity.

Instead, he said gently, "Drustan MacKeltar is not a danger to me. He is a fine laird, and 'tis honored I am to have been chosen to oversee the spiritual guidance of his clan."

Besseta shook her head, her lip trembling. A fleck of spittle foamed at the seam. "You see with a priest's narrow view. You can't see what I see. This is dire indeed, Nevin."

He gave her his most reassuring smile, one that, despite his youth, had eased the troubled hearts of countless sinners. "Will you cease trying to divine my well-being with your sticks and runes? Each time I am assigned a new position, you

reach for your charms."

"What kind of a mother would I be, if I didn't take interest in your future?" she cried.

Brushing a lock of blond hair from his face, Nevin crossed the room and kissed her wrinkled cheek, then swept his hand across the yew sticks, upsetting their mysterious design. "I am an ordained man of God, yet here you sit, reading fortunes." He took her hand and patted it soothingly. "You must let go of the old ways. How will I achieve success with the villagers, if my own dear mother persists in pagan rituals?" he teased.

Besseta snatched her hand from his and gathered her sticks defensively. "These are far more than simple sticks. I bid you, accord them proper respect. He *must* be stopped."

"What do your sticks tell you the laird will do that is so terrible?" Curiosity trumped his resolve to end this conversation as neatly as possible. He couldn't hope to curtail the dark wanderings of her mind if he didn't know what they were.

"He will soon take a lady, and she will do you harm. I think she will kill you.

Nevin's mouth opened and closed like a trout stranded on the riverbank. Although he knew there was no truth to her ominous prediction, the fact that she entertained such wicked thoughts confirmed his fears that her tenuous grasp on reality was slipping. "Why would anyone kill me? I'm a priest, for heaven's sake."

"I can't see the why of it. Mayhap his new lady will take a fancy to you, and evil doings will come of it."

"Now you truly *are* imagining things. A fancy to me, over Drustan MacKeltar?"

Besseta glanced at him, then quickly away. "You are a fine-looking lad, Nevin," she lied with motherly aplomb.

Nevin laughed. Of Besseta's five sons, only he had been born slender of build, with fine bones and a quietude that served God well but king and country poorly. He knew what he looked like. He had not been fashioned—as had Drustan

MacKeltar—for warring, conquering, and seducing women and had long ago accepted his physical shortcomings. God had purpose for him, and while spiritual purpose might seem insignificant to others, for Nevin Alexander it was more than enough.

"Put those sticks away, Mother, and I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. You needn't fret on my behalf. God watches over—" He stopped midsentence. What he'd nearly said would encourage an entirely new, and at the same time very old and very lengthy, discussion.

Besseta's eyes narrowed. "Ah, yes. Your God certainly watched over all of my sons, didn't He?"

Her bitterness was palpable and made him heartsick. Of all his flock, he'd failed most surely with his own mother. "I might remind you that quite recently He was *your* God, when I was granted this position and you were well-pleased with my promotion," Nevin said lightly. "And you will not harm the MacKeltar, Mother."

Besseta smoothed her coarse gray hair and angled her nose toward the thatched roof. "Don't you have confessions to hear, Nevin?"

"You must not jeopardize our position here, Mother," he said gently. "We have a solid home among fine people, and I hope to make it permanent. Give me your word."

Besseta kept her eyes fixed on the roof in stubborn silence.

"Look at me, Mother. You must promise." When he refused to retract his demand or avert his steady gaze, she finally gave a shrug and nodded.

"I will not harm the MacKeltar, Nevin. Now, go on with you," she said brusquely. "This old woman has things to do."

Satisfied that his mother wouldn't trouble the laird with her pagan foolishness, Nevin departed for the castle. God willing, his mother would forget her latest delusion by dinner. God willing.

* * * * *

Over the next few days, Besseta tried to make Nevin understand the danger he was in, to no avail. He chided her gently, he rebuked her less gently, and he got

those sad lines around his mouth she so hated to see.

Lines that clearly pronounced: *My mother's going mad.*

Despair settled into her weary bones, and she knew that it was up to her to do something. She would *not* lose her only remaining son. It wasn't fair that a mother should outlive all her children, and trusting God to protect them was what had gotten her into this bind to begin with. She refused to believe she'd been given the ability to foresee events only to sit back and do nothing about them.

When shortly after her alarming vision a band of wandering Rom arrived in the village of Balanoch, Besseta struck upon a solution.

It took time to barter with the proper people; although *proper* was hardly a word she'd use to describe the people with whom she was forced to deal. Besseta might read yew sticks, but simple scrying paled in comparison to the practices of the wild gypsies who wandered the Highlands, selling spells and enchantments cheek by jowl with their more-ordinary wares. Worse still, she'd had to steal Nevin's precious gold-leafed Bible, which he used only on the holiest of days, to trade for the services she purchased, and when he discovered the loss come Yuletide he would be heartbroken.

But he would be alive, by the yew!

Although Besseta suffered many sleepless nights over her decision, she knew her sticks had never failed her. If she didn't do something to prevent it, Drustan MacKeltar would take a wife and that woman would kill her son. That much her sticks had made dear. If her sticks had told her more—mayhap how the woman would do it, when, or why—she might not have been seized by such desperation. How would she survive if Nevin were gone? Who would succor an old and useless woman? Alone, the great yawning darkness with its great greedy maw would swallow her whole. She had no choice but to get rid of Drustan MacKeltar.

* * * * *

A sennight later, Besseta stood with the gypsies and their leader—a silver-haired man named Rushka—in the clearing near the little loch some distance west of Castle Keltar.

Drustan MacKeltar lay unconscious at her feet.

She eyed him warily. The MacKeltar was a large man, towering and dark, a mountain of bronzed muscle and sinew, even when flat on his back. When she shivered and nudged him gingerly with her toe, the gypsies laughed.

"The moon could fall on him and he wouldn't waken," Rushka informed her, his dark gaze amused.

"You're certain?" Besseta pressed.

"'Tis no natural sleep."

"You didn't kill him, did you?" she fretted. "I promised Nevin I wouldn't harm him."

Rushka arched a brow. "You have an interesting code, old woman," he mocked. "Nay, we did not kill him, he but slumbers, and will eternally. 'Tis an ancient spell, laid most carefully."

When Rushka turned away, instructing his men to place the enchanted laird in the wagon, Besseta heaved a sigh of relief. It had been risky—slipping into the castle, drugging the laird's wine and luring him to the clearing near the loch—but all had gone according to plan. He'd collapsed on the bank of the glassy lake and the gypsies had set about their ritual. They'd painted strange symbols upon his chest, sprinkled herbs and chanted.

Although the gypsies made her uneasy and she'd longed to flee back to the safety of her cottage, she'd forced herself to watch, to be certain the canny gypsies would keep their word, and to assure herself Nevin was finally safe—forever beyond Drustan MacKeltar's reach. The moment the final words of the spell had been uttered, the very air in the clearing had changed: she'd felt an uncommon iciness, suffered a sudden, overwhelming weariness, even glimpsed a strange light settling around the laird's body. The gypsies indeed possessed powerful magic.

"*Truly* eternally?" Besseta pressed. "He will ne'er awaken?"

"I told you, old woman," Rushka said impatiently, "the man will slumber, frozen, utterly untouched by time, ne'er to awaken, unless both human blood and

sunshine commingle upon the spell etched upon his chest."

"Blood and sunshine would wake him? That must never happen!" Besseta exclaimed, panicking all over again.

"It won't. You have my word. Not where we plan to hide his body. Sunlight will ne'er reach him in the underground caverns near Loch Ness. None will e'er find him. None know of the place but us."

"You must hide him very deep," Besseta pressed. "Seal him in. He must *never be* found!"

"I said you have my word," Rushka said sharply.

When the gypsies, wagon in tow, disappeared into the forest, Besseta sank to her knees in the clearing, and murmured a prayer of thanks to whatever deity might be listening.

Any idle feelings of guilt were far outweighed by relief, and she consoled herself with the thought that she hadn't *really* hurt him.

He was, as she had promised Nevin, unharmed.

Essentially.

HIGHLANDS OF SCOTLAND

September 19, Present Day

Chapter 1

Gwen Cassidy needed a man.

Desperately.

Failing that, she'd settle for a cigarette. *God, I hate my life*, she thought. *I don't even know who I am anymore.*

Glancing around the crowded interior of the tour bus, Gwen took a deep breath and rubbed the nicotine patch under her arm. After this fiasco, she deserved a cigarette, didn't she? Except, even if she managed to escape the horrid bus and find a pack, she was afraid she might expire from nicotine overdose if she smoked one. The patch made her feel shaky and ill.

Perhaps before quitting she should have waited until she'd found her cherry picker, she mused. It wasn't as if she was drawing them like flies to honey in her current mood. Her virginity was hardly presented in its best light when she kept snarling at every man she met.

She leaned back against the cracked seat, wincing when the bus hit a pothole and caused the wiry coils of the seat to dig into her shoulder blade. Even the smooth, mysterious, slate-gray surface of Loch Ness beyond the rattling window that wouldn't stay closed when it rained—and wouldn't stay open otherwise—failed to intrigue her.

"Gwen, are you feeling all right?" Bert Hardy asked kindly from across the aisle.

Gwen peered at Bert through her Jennifer Aniston fringed bangs, expensively beveled to attract her own Brad Pitt. Right now, they simply tickled her nose and annoyed her. Bert had proudly informed her, when they'd begun the tour a week ago, that he was seventy-three and sex had never been better (this said while patting the hand of his newlywed, plump, and blushing bride, Beatrice). Gwen had smiled politely and congratulated them and, since that mild show of interest, had become the doting couple's favorite "young American lassie."

"I'm fine, Bert," she assured him, wondering where he'd found the lemon polyester shirt and the golf-turf-green trousers that clashed painfully with his

white leather dress shoes and tartan socks. Completing the rainbow ensemble, a red wool cardigan was neatly buttoned about his paunch.

"You don't look so well, there, dearie," Beatrice fretted, adjusting a wide-brimmed straw hat atop her soft silvery-blue curls. "A little green about the gills."

"It's just the bumpy ride, Beatrice."

"Well, we're nearly to the village, and you must have a bite to eat with us before we go sightseeing," Bert said firmly. "We can go see that house, you know, the one where that sorcerer Aleister Crowley used to live. They say it's haunted," he confided, wiggling bushy white brows.

Gwen nodded apathetically. She knew it was futile to protest, because although she suspected Beatrice might have taken pity on her, Bert was determined to ensure that she had "fun." It had taken her only a few days to figure out that she should never have embarked upon this ridiculous quest.

But back home in Sante Fe, New Mexico, as she'd peered out the window of her cubicle at the Allstate Insurance Company, arguing with yet another injured insured who'd managed to amass an astounding \$9,827 worth of chiropractic bills from an accident that had caused a mere \$127 in damage to his rear bumper, the idea of being in Scotland—or anywhere else, for that matter—had been irresistible.

So she'd let a travel agent convince her that a fourteen-day tour through the romantic Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland was just what she needed, at the bargain price of \$999. The price was acceptable; the mere thought of doing something so impulsive was terrifying, and precisely what she needed to shake up her life.

She should have known that fourteen days in Scotland for a thousand dollars *had* to be a senior citizens' bus tour. But she'd been so frantic to escape the drudgery and emptiness of her life that she'd only cursorily glanced through the itinerary and not given her possible traveling companions a second thought.

Thirty-eight senior citizens, ranging in age from sixty-two to eighty-nine, chatted, laughed, and embraced each new village/pub/bowel movement with

boundless enthusiasm, and she knew that when they returned home they would play cards and regale their elderly and envious friends with endless anecdotes. She wondered what stories they would tell about the twenty-five-year-old virgin who had traveled with them.

Prickly as a porcupine? Stupid enough to try to give up smoking while taking the first real vacation in her life and simultaneously trying to divest herself of her virginity?

She sighed. The seniors really were sweet, but sweet wasn't what she was looking for.

She was looking for passionate, heart-pounding sex. Sex that was down and dirty, wild and sweaty and hot.

Lately she ached for something she couldn't even put a name to, something that made her restless and anxious when she watched 10th Kingdom or her favorite star-crossed lovers' quest, *Ladyhawke*. Were she still alive, her mother, renowned physicist Dr. Elizabeth Cassidy, would assure her it was nothing more than a biological urge programmed into her genes.

Following in her mother's footsteps, Gwen had majored in physics, then worked briefly as a research assistant at Triton Corp. while completing her Ph.D. (before her Great Fit of Rebellion had landed her at Allstate). Sometimes, when her head had been swimming with equations, she'd wondered if her mother wasn't right, if all there was to life could be explained by genetic programming and science.

Popping a piece of gum in her mouth, Gwen stared out the window. She certainly wasn't going to find her cherry picker on this bus. Nor had she entertained even a modicum of success in the prior villages. She had to do something soon, because if she didn't, she would end up going back home no different than she'd arrived, and frankly that thought was more terrifying than the idea of seducing a man she hardly knew.

The bus lurched to a halt, pitching Gwen forward. She struck her mouth on the metal frame of the seat in front of her. She cast an irate glance at the rotund, bald bus driver, wondering how the old folks always seemed to anticipate the sudden stop, when she never could. Were they simply more cautious with their brittle bones? Strapped into the seats better? In cahoots with the ancient, portly driver?

She dug in her backpack for her compact and, sure enough, her lower lip was swelling.

Well, maybe that will entice a man, she thought, poking it out a little more, as she dutifully followed Bert and Beatrice off the bus and into the sunny morning. Sucker lips: Didn't men fixate on plump lips?

"I can't, Bert," she said, when the kindly man tucked her arm in his. "I need to be alone for a little while," she added apologetically.

"Is your lip swollen again, dear?" Bert frowned. "Don't you wear your seat belt? Are you sure you're okay?"

Gwen ignored the first two questions. "I'm fine. I just want to go for a walk and gather my thoughts," she said, trying not to notice that Beatrice was regarding her from beneath the wide brim of her hat with the unnerving intensity of a woman who had survived multiple daughters.

Sure enough, Beatrice pushed Bert toward the front steps of the inn. "You go on, Bertie," she told her new husband. "We girls need to chat a moment."

While her husband disappeared into the quaint, thatch-roofed inn, Beatrice guided Gwen to a stone bench and pulled her down beside her.

"There is a man for you, Gwen Cassidy," Beatrice said.

Gwen's eyes widened. "How do you know that's what I'm looking for?"

Beatrice smiled, cornflower-blue eyes crinkling in her plump face. "You listen to Beatrice, dearie: Fling caution to the wind. If I were your age and looked like you, I'd be shaking my bom-bom everywhere I went."

"Bom-bom?" Gwen's eyebrows rose.

"Petunia, dear. Booty, behind," Beatrice said with a wink. "Get out there and find a man of your own. Don't let us spoil your trip, dragging you about. You don't need old folks like us around. You need a strapping young man to sweep you off your feet. And *keep* you off them for a good long while," she said meaningfully.

"But I can't find a man, Beatrice." Gwen blew out a frustrated breath. "I've been searching for my cherry picker for months now—"

"Cherry... *Oh!*" Beatrice's round shoulders, swathed in pink wool and pearls, shook with laughter.

Gwen winced. "Oh, God, how embarrassing! I can't believe I just said that. That's just what I started calling him in my mind because I'm the oldest living... er—"

"Virgin," Beatrice supplied helpfully, with another laugh.

"Mm-hmm."

"Doesn't a pretty young woman like you have a man back home?"

Gwen sighed. "In the past six months I've dated *oodles* of men..." She trailed off. After her prominent parents had been killed in a plane crash in March, returning from a conference in Hong Kong, she'd turned into a veritable dating machine. Her only relative, her grandfather on her father's side, had Alzheimer's and hadn't recognized her in forever. Lately, Gwen felt like the last Mohican, wandering around, desperate for someplace to call home.

"And?" Beatrice prodded.

"And I'm not a virgin because I'm trying to be," Gwen said grumpily. "I can't find a man I want, and I'm beginning to think the problem is me. Maybe I expect too much. Maybe I'm holding out for something that doesn't even exist." She'd voiced her secret fear. Maybe grand passion *was* just a dream. With all the kissing she'd done in the past few months, she'd not once been overcome with desire. Her parents certainly hadn't had any great passion between them. Come to think of it, she wasn't sure she'd ever seen grand passion outside of a movie theater or a book.

"Oh, dearie, don't think that!" Beatrice exclaimed. "You're too young and lovely to give up hope. You never know when Mr. Right may walk in. Just look at me," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Over-the-hill, overweight, in a dwindling market of men, I'd resigned myself to being a widow. I'd been alone for years, then one sunny morning my Bertie waltzed into the little diner on Elm Street where the girls and I breakfast every Thursday, and I fell for him harder than the fat lady at the circus takes a tumble. Dreamy as a young girl again, fussing with my hair and"—she blushed—"I even bought a few things at Victoria's Secret."

She lowered her voice and winked. "You know you've got hanky-panky on your mind when perfectly respectable white bras and panties suddenly won't do anymore, and you find yourself buying pink ones, lilac ones, lime green and the like."

Gwen cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably, wondering if her lilac bra showed through her white tank top. But Beatrice was oblivious, chatting away.

"And I'll tell you, Bertie certainly wasn't what I thought I wanted in a man. I'd always thought I liked simple, honest, hardworking men. I never thought I'd get involved with a dangerous man like my Bertie," she confided. Her smile turned tender, dreamy. "He was with the CIA for thirty years before he retired. You should hear some of his stories. Thrilling, positively *thrilling*."

Gwen gaped. "Bertie was CIA?" *Rainbow Bertie?*

"You can't judge the contents of the package by the wrapper, dearie," Beatrice said, patting her cheek. "And one more piece of advice: Don't be in too much of a rush to give it away, Gwen. Find a man who is worthy. Find a man you want to talk with into the wee hours, a man you can argue with when necessary, and a man who makes you *sizzle* when he touches you."

"Sizzle?" Gwen repeated doubtfully.

"Trust me. When it's right, you'll know," Beatrice said, beaming. "You'll feel it. You won't be able to walk away from it." Satisfied that she'd said her piece, Beatrice planted a pink-lipsticked kiss on Gwen's cheek, then rose, smoothing her sweater over her hips, before disappearing into the gaily painted inn. Gwen watched her retreat in thoughtful silence.

Beatrice Hardy, age sixty-nine and a good fifty pounds overweight, walked with confidence. Glided with the grace of a woman half her size, swayed her ample bottom and serenely displayed her cleavage.

In fact, she walked like she was beautiful.

Worthy. Hmph!

At this point, Gwen Cassidy would settle for a man who didn't require a stiff dose of Viagra.

* * * * *

Gwen paused to rest atop the small mountain of rocks she'd climbed. After discovering she couldn't check into her room at the inn until after four o'clock, and firm in her resolve to not march into the nearest shop and buy a pack of that-word-she-wasn't-saying-anymore, she'd grabbed her backpack and an apple and trotted off into the hills for an introspective hike. The hills above Loch Ness were dotted with outcroppings of stone, and the group of rocks upon which she stood extended for nearly half a mile, rising in breakneck hills and falling in jagged ravines. It had been a tough climb, but she'd relished the exercise after being cooped up in the stale air of the bus for so long.

There was no denying that Scotland was lovely. She'd tromped gingerly through patches of hawthorn, skirted prickly thistles, paused to admire a rowan tree's bright red berries, and kicked about a few spiky green horse chestnuts that heralded autumn with their tumble to the ground. She'd stood long moments admiring a field of cross-leaved heath that ascended and blended with a hillside of purple-pink heather. She and a dainty red deer had spooked each other as she'd passed through the woodland clearing in which it grazed.

Peace had settled over her, the higher she'd hiked into the lush meadows and rocky hills. Far beneath her, Loch Ness stretched twenty-four miles long, over a mile wide, and, in places, a thousand feet deep, or so said the brochure that she'd read on the bus, highlighting the fact that the loch never froze in the winter because of its peaty, slightly acid content. The loch was a huge silvery mirror shimmering beneath the cloudless sky. The sun, nearly at its zenith, marked the approaching noon hour and felt delicious on her skin. The weather had been unusually warm for the past few days and she planned to take advantage of it.

She flopped down on a flat rock and stretched out, soaking up the sunshine. Her group was scheduled to remain in the village until seven-thirty the following morning, so she had ample time to relax and enjoy nature before reboarding the tour bus from hell. Although she'd never meet an eligible prospect up here in the foothills, at least there were no phones ringing, with irate insureds on the other end, and no senior citizens casting nosy glances her way.

She knew they gossiped about her; the old folks talked about *everything*. She suspected they were making up for all the times they'd held their tongues when they were young, invoking the impunity of advanced age. She found herself

rather looking forward to senior immunity. What a relief it would be to say exactly what she thought for a change.

And what would you say, Gwen?

"I'm lonely," she muttered softly. "I would say that I'm lonely and I'm damn tired of pretending that everything's fine."

How she wished something exciting would happen!

It just figured that the one time she'd tried to *make* something happen, she'd ended up on a senior citizens' bus tour. She may as well face it, she was doomed to live a dry, uneventful, and lonely life.

Eyes shut against the bright rays, she groped for her backpack to get her sunglasses but misjudged the distance and knocked the bag off the rock. She heard it bounce amid the clatter of loose stones for several moments, then a protracted silence, and finally a solid thump. Tucking her fringed bangs behind one ear, she sat up to see where it had fallen. She was dismayed to discover that it had tumbled off the rock, down a gully, and to the bottom of a narrow, forbidding precipice.

She moved to the lip of the aperture, eyeing it warily. Her patches were in her pack, and she certainly couldn't be expected to remain a non-that-word-she-wasn't-thinking without something to take the edge off. Gauging the depth of the rocky cleft to be no more than twenty-five to thirty feet, she decided she was capable of retrieving it.

She had no alternative; she *had* to go down after it.

Lowering herself over the edge, she felt for toeholds. The hiking boots she'd laced on that morning had rugged, gripping soles that made the descent a little easier; however, as rough stone grazed her bare legs, she found herself wishing she'd worn jeans instead of her favorite pair of khaki Abercrombie & Fitch shorts that were so in vogue. Her lacy white tank top was comfortable for hiking, but the faded denim button-down she'd tied around her waist just kept getting tangled about her legs, so she paused a moment to untie it and let it waft down onto her backpack. Once she reached the bottom, she'd tuck it in her pack before climbing back up.

It was slow, strenuous going, but half her life was in that pack—and it was arguably the better half. Cosmetics, hairbrush, toothpaste, floss, panties, and many other items that she'd wanted on her person in case her luggage got lost. *Oh, admit it, Gwen, she thought, you could live out of that pack for weeks.*

The sun beat down on her shoulders as she descended, and she started to sweat. It figured that the sun had to shine directly into that crack at that moment, she thought irritably. Half an hour earlier or later, and it wouldn't have penetrated there.

Near the bottom, she slipped and inadvertently kicked her bag, wedging it firmly at the bottom of the narrow crevice. Squinting up into the sun, she muttered, "Come on, I'm trying to quit smoking down here, you could help me anytime now."

Easing herself down the last few feet, she placed one foot on the ground. There. She'd made it. Hardly enough room to turn around in the tight space, but she was there.

Lowering her other foot, Gwen grabbed her button-down and stretched her fingers toward the strap of her pack.

When the ground gave way beneath her feet, it was so sudden and unexpected that she scarcely had time to gasp before she plunged through the rocky bottom of the crevice. She fell for a terrifying few seconds, then landed with such force that the impact knocked the air from her lungs.

As she struggled to draw a breath, crushed rock and dirt showered her where she lay. Adding insult to injury, the backpack fell through the hole after her and thumped her in the shoulder before rolling off into the darkness. She finally managed a ragged breath, spit hair and dirt out of her mouth, and mentally assessed her condition before attempting to move.

She'd fallen hard and felt bruised from head to toe. Her hands were bleeding from her panicked attempt to catch herself as she'd plunged through the jagged opening, but, blessedly, it didn't appear she'd broken any bones.

Gingerly, she turned her head and gazed up at the hole through which she'd fallen. A stubborn ray of sunshine filtered down on her.

I will not panic. But the hole was an impossible distance above her head. Worse still, she'd not passed any other hikers during her climb. She might yell herself hoarse, yet never be found. Shaking off a nervous shiver, she peered into the gloom. The shadowy blackness of a wall loomed a few yards away, and she could hear the faint trickle of water off in the distance. Obviously, she'd fallen into an underground cavern of sorts.

But the pamphlet said nothing of any caves near Loch Ness—

All thought ceased abruptly as she realized that whatever she was lying upon was not rock or soil. Stunned by the abrupt fall, she'd naturally assumed she'd landed on the hard floor of a cavern. But while it was hard, it was certainly not cold. Warm, rather. And given that until a few moments ago no sunlight had penetrated this place, what were the odds that something could be warm in this cool, damp cave?

Swallowing, she remained utterly still, trying to decide what she was lying on without actually looking at it.

She nudged it with a hipbone. It gave slightly, and it did not feel like soil. *I'm going to be sick*, she thought. *It feels like a person.*

Had she fallen into an old burial chamber? But, then, wouldn't it be nothing but bones? As she debated further movement, the sun reached its zenith, and a brilliant shaft of sunlight bathed the spot where she'd fallen.

Summoning all her courage, she forced herself to look down.

Gwen screamed.

Chapter 2

She'd fallen on a body. One that, considering she hadn't disturbed it, must be dead. *Or, she worried, perhaps I killed it when I fell.*

When she managed to stop screaming, she found that she'd pushed herself up and was straddling it, her palms braced on its chest. Not its chest, she realized, but *his* chest. The motionless figure beneath her was undeniably male.

Sinfully male.

She snatched her hands away and sucked in a shocked breath.

However he'd managed to get here, if he was dead, his demise had been quite recent. He was in perfect condition and—her hands crept back to his chest—warm. He had the sculpted physique of a professional football player, with wide shoulders, pumped biceps and pecs, and washboard abs. His hips beneath her were lean and powerful. Strange symbols were tattooed across his bare chest.

She took slow, deep breaths to ease the sudden tightness in her chest. Leaning cautiously forward, she peered at a face that was savagely beautiful. His was the type of dominant male virility women dreamed about in dark, erotic fantasies but knew didn't *really* exist. Black lashes swept his golden skin, beneath arched brows and a silky fall of long black hair. His jaw was dusted with a blue-black shadow beard; his lips were pink and firm and sensually full. She brushed her finger against them, then felt mildly perverse, so she pretended she was just checking to see if he was alive and shook him, but he didn't respond. Cupping his nose with her hand, she was relieved to feel a soft puff of breath. *He isn't dead, thank God.* It made her feel better about finding him so attractive. Palm flush to his chest, she was further reassured by his strong heartbeat. Although it wasn't beating very often, at least it was. He must be deeply unconscious, perhaps in a coma, she decided. Whichever it was, he couldn't help her.

Her gaze darted back up to the hole. Even if she managed to wake him and then stood on his shoulders, she still wouldn't be near the lip of the hole. Sunshine streamed over her face, mocking her with a freedom that was so near, yet so impossibly far, and she shivered again. "Just what am I supposed to do now?" she muttered.

Despite the fact that he was unconscious and of no use, her gaze swept back down. He exuded such vitality that his condition baffled her. She couldn't decide if she was upset that he was unconscious, or relieved. With his looks he was surely a womanizer, just the kind of man she steered away from by instinct. Having grown up surrounded by scientists, she had no experience with men of his ilk. On the rare occasions she'd glimpsed a man like him sauntering out of Gold's Gym she'd gawked surreptitiously, grateful that she was safely in her car. So much testosterone made her nervous. It couldn't possibly be healthy.

Cherry picker extraordinaire. The thought caught her off guard. Mortified, she berated herself, because he was injured and there she was, sitting on him, thinking lascivious thoughts. She pondered the possibility that she'd developed some kind of hormone imbalance, perhaps a surfeit of perky little eggs.

She eyed the designs on the man's chest more closely, wondering if one of them concealed a wound. The strange symbols, unlike any tattoos she'd ever seen, were smeared with blood from the abrasions on her palms.

Gwen leaned back a few inches so a ray of sunshine spilled across his chest. As she studied him, a curious thing happened: the brightly colored designs blurred before her eyes, growing indistinct, as if they were fading, leaving only streaks of her blood to mar his muscled chest. But that wasn't possible...

Gwen blinked as, undeniably, several symbols disappeared entirely. In a matter of moments all of them were gone, vanished as if they'd never existed.

Perplexed, she glanced up at his face and sucked in an astonished breath.

His eyes were open and he was watching her. He had remarkable eyes that glittered like shards of silver and ice, sleepy eyes that banked a touch of amusement and unmistakable masculine interest. He stretched his body beneath hers with the self-indulgent grace of a cat prolonging the pleasure of awakening, and she suspected that although he was rousing physically, his mental acuity was not fully engaged. His pupils were large and dark, as if he'd recently had his eyes dilated for an exam or taken some drug.

Oh, God, he's conscious and I'm straddling him! She could imagine what he was thinking and could hardly blame him for it. She was as intimately positioned as a woman astride her lover, knees on either side of his hips, her palms flat against

his rock-hard stomach.

She tensed and tried to scramble off him, but his hands clamped around her thighs and pinned her there. He didn't speak, merely secured and regarded her, his eyes dropping to linger appreciatively on her breasts. When he slid his hands up her bare thighs, she seriously regretted having put on her short-shorts this morning. A slip of a lilac thong was all that was beneath them, and his fingers were toying with the hem of her shorts, perilously close to slipping inside.

His heavy-lidded gaze reflected a languor that had nothing to do with having just awakened, and there was no doubt what was on his mind. *But this is no safe cherry picker*, Gwen thought, growing more concerned by the moment. *This man looks like a cherry tree chopper-downer*.

"Look, I was just about to get off you," she babbled. "I didn't plan to sit on you. I fell through the hole and landed on you. I was hiking and accidentally knocked my backpack down a crevice, and when I went to rescue it the ground gave way beneath me and here I am. On that note, why didn't my falling on you wake you?" More important, she thought, how *long* had he been awake? Long enough to know that she'd copped a few perverted feels?

Confusion flickered in his mesmerizing eyes, but he said nothing.

"I'm usually groggy when I first wake up too." She tried for a reassuring tone.

He shifted his hips, subtly reminding her that she didn't wake up quite like him. There was something happening beneath her and, like the rest of him, it was in-your-face male.

When he smiled at her, revealing even, white teeth and a slight cleft in his chin, the part of her brain that made intelligent decisions melted like chocolate taffy left by the pool on a hot summer day. Her heart raced, her palms felt clammy, and her lips were suddenly parched. For a moment, she was too stupefied to feel anything but relief. So *this* was mindless sexual attraction. It *did* exist! Just like in the movies!

Her relief was doused by anxiety when he dragged her forward against his chest, cupped her bottom with both hands, and ground her pelvis against his. He buried his face in her hair and thrust upward, rubbing against her like a sleek and

powerful animal. A hiss of breath escaped her, an involuntary reaction to a surge of desire that was far too intense to be sane. She was drowning in sensations: the possessive crush of his arms, the testosterone-laden scent of man, the sensual scrape of his shadow beard against her cheek when he caught the lobe of her ear with his teeth, and *oh*—that wildly erotic rhythm of his hips...

He squeezed her bottom, kneading and caressing, then one hand slid upward, lingering deliciously over the hollow where her spine met her hips, inching ever upward until he palmed the back of her head and guided her lips nearer his.

"Good morrow, English," he said, a breath from her lips. The words were delivered in a thick brogue that sounded roughened by too much whisky and peat smoke.

"Let me go," she managed, angling her face away from his. He'd fitted his erection snugly between her thighs, and a firm hand splayed across her bottom kept her locked precisely where he wanted her. He was rock-hard and hot through the lightweight fabric of her shorts. Expertly, he thrust against the most perfect spot nature had bestowed upon a woman, and Gwen coughed to camouflage a moan. If he treated her to a few more of those cocky strokes, she might have her first real orgasm without even sacrificing her cherry.

"Kiss me," he murmured into her ear. His lips braised her neck; his tongue tasted her skin with lazy sensuality.

"I am *not* kissing you. I can understand how you might have gotten the wrong impression, waking up to find me sprawled on top of you, but I told you that I didn't mean to land on you. It was an accident." *Aw, kiss him, Gwen*, clamored a hundred perky eggs. *Shut up*, she rebuked. *We don't even know him, and until moments ago we thought he was dead. That's no way to start a relationship.*

Who's asking for a relationship? Kisskisskiss! her babies-in-waiting insisted.

"Lovely lass, kiss me." He planted a hungry, open-mouthed kiss in the sensitive area between her collarbone and the base of her throat. His teeth closed gently on her skin, his tongue lingered, sending chills up her spine. "On my mouth."

She shuddered as the velvety stroke made her nipples pearl against his chest. "Uh-uh," she said, not trusting herself to say too much.

"Nay?" He sounded surprised. And undeterred. He nibbled the underside of her chin while splaying his hand intimately between the deft of her behind.

"No. No way. *Nay*. Understand? And get your hand off my butt," she added with a squeal, when he squeezed again. "*Oooh*. Stop that!"

Lazily, he slid his hand up from her hips to her head, availing himself of the opportunity to thoroughly caress every inch in between. Burying both hands in her hair, he gripped her near the scalp and tugged her head gently back so he could search her eyes.

"I *mean* it."

He arched a dubious brow but, to her surprise, he proved to be a gentleman and slowly relinquished his grip. She scrambled off him. Unaware that they'd been lying on a slab of stone that was several feet above the floor of the cavern, she stumbled to her knees on the floor.

He sat up on the slab gingerly, as if every muscle in his body was stiff.

He swept his gaze about the cavern, shook his head with the vigor of a drenched dog casting off rain, then gave the interior of the cave a second, thorough glance. He flipped his long dark hair over his shoulder and narrowed his eyes. Gwen witnessed the precise moment the confusion of deep slumber quit his mind. The seductive gleam in his gaze faded, and he folded his muscular arms across his chest. He glanced at her with an expression both startled and angry. "I doona recall coming here," he said accusingly. "What have you done? Did you bring me here? Is this witchery, lass?"

Witchery? "No," she said hastily. "I told you, I fell in through that hole"—she jerked her thumb up in the direction of the shaft of sunlight—"and you were already in here. I landed on you. I have no idea how you got here."

His cool gaze roamed over the jagged opening, the loose stones and dirt scattered around the slab, the blood on her hands, her disheveled condition. After a moment's hesitation, he appeared to deem it a plausible story. "If you did not come seeking my personal attentions, why are you so shamelessly attired?" he said flatly.

"Perhaps because it's hot out?" she shot back, tugging defensively at the hem of

her khakis. Her shorts weren't *that* short. "It's not like you have much on yourself."

"'Tis natural for a man. 'Tis not natural for a woman to cut off her chemise at the waist and doff her gown. Any man would make the assumption I did. You are wantonly clad, and you were draped most intimately across my loins. When a man first awakens, it sometimes takes several moments before he starts thinking clearly."

"And here I thought it took several years, perhaps a lifetime for the average man's intellect to kick in," she said snidery. *Chemise? Doff?*

He snorted, shaking his head again, vigorously enough that it was giving *her* a headache. "Where am I?" he demanded.

"In a cave," she muttered, feeling less than charitable toward him. First, he'd tried to have sex with her, then he'd insulted her clothing, and now he was behaving as if *she'd* done something wrong to *him*. "*And you should apologize to me.*"

His brows arched with surprise. "For waking up to find a half-clad woman lying on top of me and thinking she wished me to pleasure her? I doona think so. And I am not simple," he chided. "'Tis dear I'm in a cave. In what part of Scotland does this cave reside?"

"Near Loch Ness. Near Inverness," she said. She backed away from him a few steps.

He blew out a relieved breath. "By Amergin, 'tis not too much of a fankle. I am but a few days and not many leagues from home."

Amergin? Fankle? Who'd taught the man English? His brogue was so thick that she had to listen intently to decipher what he was saying, and even then not all of it made sense. Could the glorious man have grown up in some obscure Highland village where time stood still, cars were twenty years out of date, and the old ways and manner of speech were still revered?

When he was silent for several minutes, she wondered if perhaps he really was hurt in some way and had been resting in the cave. Maybe he'd struck his head; she hadn't explored that part of him. *Damn near the only part you didn't*, she

thought. Gwen scowled, feeling vulnerable in the cavern with the dark, sexual man who occupied too much space and was using more than his fair share of oxygen. His confusion was only adding to her unease.

"Why don't you show me the way out, and we can talk outside," she encouraged. Perhaps he'd be less attractive in broad daylight. Perhaps it was merely the dim, confined atmosphere of the cave that made him seem so large and dizzyingly masculine.

"You vow you had nothing to do with how I came to be here?"

She raised her hands in a gesture that said, *Why don't you just take a good hard look at little ole' me, and then look at you?*

"There is that," he agreed with her wordless rebuke. "You doona amount to much."

She refused to dignify his comment with a response. When he rose from the slab she realized that, contrary to her initial impression, he wasn't wearing unfashionably long plaid shorts, like some of her elderly tour-mates had worn, but was clad in a length of patterned fabric fastened about his waist. It brushed above his knees, and his feet and calves were encased in soft boots. She tipped her head back to look up at him and, disconcerted by how he towered over her, blurted, "How tall *are* you?" She could have kicked herself when it came out sounding awed. Standing beside him, few people would amount to much. Although she'd never get involved with a man like him, it was impossible to remain unaffected by his incredible height and powerfully developed body.

He shrugged. "Taller than the hearth."

"The... hearth?"

He stopped his intent perusal of the cave and glanced at her. "How am I to think with you chattering away? The hearth in the Greathall, the one Dageus and I vied to outgrow." An expression of deep sadness crossed his face at the mention of Dageus. He fell silent a moment, then shook his head. "He never did. Missed by so much." He demonstrated the space of an inch with his finger and thumb. "I'm taller than my father, and taller than two of the stones at *Ban Drochaid*."

"I meant in feet," she clarified. Speaking of the mundane gave her a measure of

calm.

He eyed his boots a moment and appeared to be doing some rapid calculations.

"Forget it. I get the picture." *Six and a half feet, perhaps taller.* And to a woman five foot three inches on her best day, daunting. She stooped and grabbed her backpack, sliding a strap over her shoulder. "Let's go."

"Hold. I am yet unprepared for travel, lass." He moved to a pile by the wall, which Gwen had thought was a jumble of rocks. She watched nervously as he retrieved his belongings. He did something she didn't quite follow with the blanket thingie he was wearing, where part of it ended up over one shoulder. After fastening a pouch about his waist, he draped wide bands of leather over each shoulder so that they crossed in an X over his chest. These he secured at his waist with another wide band of leather that belted them snugly in place, then he donned a fourth band that encircled his pecs.

Was he dressing in some old costume? Gwen wondered. She'd seen something similar to his attire in a castle her group had toured yesterday, on one of the medieval sketches in the armory. Their guide had explained that the bands fashioned a sort of armor, adorned in critical places—such as above the heart and over the abdomen—with ornate metal discs.

As she watched, he fastened similar leather bands that stretched from wrist to elbow around his powerful forearms. She stared in silence when he began tucking dozens of knives away—knives that looked alarmingly real. Two went into each wristband, handle down toward his palm, ten on each crossband. When he bent to the dwindling pile and hefted a massive double-bladed ax, she flinched. *Cherry tree chopper-downer, indeed.* Definitely not a man a woman could take any chances with. He raised an arm and lowered it behind his right shoulder, sliding the handle into the bands across his back. Last, he sheathed a sword at his waist.

By the time he was done she was aghast. "Are those real?"

He turned a cool silver gaze on her. "Aye. You can scarce kill a man otherwise."

"Kill a man?" she repeated faintly.

He shrugged and eyed the hole above them and said nothing for a long while.

Just when she was beginning to think he'd forgotten her entirely, he said, "I could toss you that high."

Oh, yes, he probably could. With one arm. "No, thank you," she said frostily. Small she might be, a basketball she was not.

He grinned at her tone. "But I fear that doing so might cause more rocks to collapse upon us. Come, we will find the way out."

She swallowed. "You *really* don't remember where you came in?"

"Nay, lass, I'm afraid I doona." He measured her for a moment. "Nor do I recall why," he added reluctantly.

His response troubled her. How could he not know how or why he'd entered the cave, when he had obviously come in, removed his weapons, and piled them neatly before lying down? Did he have amnesia?

"Come. We must make haste. I care naught for this place. You must put your clothes back on."

Her hackles rose and she barely resisted the urge to hiss like a cat. "My clothes *are* on."

He raised a brow, then shrugged. "As you will. If you are comfortable strolling about in such a fashion, far be it from me to complain." Crossing the chamber, he took her wrist and began dragging her along.

Gwen allowed him to tug her behind him for a short distance, but once they'd left the cavern, all light disappeared. He was guiding them by feeling his way along the wall of the tunnel, his other hand latched about her wrist, and she began to fear they might plunge into another crevice, hidden by the darkness. "Do you know these caves?" she asked. The blackness was so absolute that it was crowding her in, suffocating her. She needed light and she needed it now.

"Nay, and if you are telling me the truth and you fell through the hole, then you doona either," he reminded. "Have you a better idea?"

"Yes." She tugged on his hand. "If you'll just stop a moment, I can help."

"Have you fire to light our way, wee English? For'tis what we sorely need."

His voice was amused, and it irritated her. He'd taken her measure, deemed her helpless, and that pissed her off. And why did he keep calling her English? Was it the

Scottish version of American, and perhaps they called people from England British? She knew she had a trace of an English accent because her mother had been raised and schooled in England, but it wasn't *that* pronounced. "Yes, I do," she snapped.

He stopped so suddenly that she ran into the back of him, striking her cheekbone on the handle of his ax. Although she couldn't see him, she felt him turn, smelled the spicy male scent of his skin, then his hands were on her shoulders.

"Where have you fire? Here?" He sifted his fingers through her long hair. "Nay, perhaps here." His hand brushed her lips in the dark, and if she hadn't clamped them shut he would have slipped the tip of his finger between them. The man was positively outrageous, hellbent on seduction with a single-mindedness that made her fear for her resolve. "Ah, here," he purred, sliding his hand over her derriere, then yanking her against him. He was still erect. *Unbelievable*, she thought dazedly. He laughed, a husky, confident sound. "I doona doubt you have fire, but'tis naught that might help us escape this cave, though it would undoubtedly make it vastly more amenable."

Oh, *definitely mocking now*. She twisted away from his liberty-taking hands. "You are so arrogant. Have all those steroids eaten away your brain cells?"

He was silent a moment, and his lack of response unnerved her. She couldn't see him and wondered what he was thinking. Was he preparing to pounce on her again? Finally he said slowly, "I doona understand your question, lass."

"Forget it. Just let go of me so I can get something out of my pack," she said stiffly. She slipped it off her shoulder and thrust it at him. "Hold this a minute." While she'd been willing to discard her cigarettes, throwing away a perfectly good lighter had seemed wasteful. Besides, she'd quit before, and then when she started again, she had to buy a new lighter every time. Rummaging in one of the external pockets, she sighed with relief when her fingers closed on the silver Bic. When she pressed the little button, he roared and leaped back. His heavy-lidded eyes, glittering with banked sensuality, widened in amazement.

"You *do* have fire—"

"I have a lighter," she interrupted defensively. "But I don't smoke," she hastened to add, not in the mood to entertain the disdain of a man who was clearly an athlete of some kind. She'd taken up smoking two years ago during the Great Fit of Rebellion, right after she and her parents had quit speaking permanently, and then she'd ended up addicted. Now, for the third time, she'd quit, and by God she was going to be successful this time.

His fingers closed over the lighter, and he assumed possession of it. As she stood beside him in the darkness, as he took her lighter away and the flame flickered out, she sensed that he would do the same with anything he wanted. Casually assume possession. Wrap his strong hand around it and claim it.

She was surprised when he fumbled for several moments before he managed to press the little button that released the flame. How could he not know how to use a lighter? Even a health fanatic would have seen someone light a cigar or a pipe, if only on TV or in a movie. She suffered another attack of the shivers. When he resumed the pace, she followed him—the only alternative to remain by herself in the dark, and that was no alternative at all.

"English?" he said softly.

"Why do you call me that?"

"You haven't given me your name."

"I don't call you Scotty, do I?" she said irritably. Irritated by his strength, his arrogance, his blatant sexuality.

He laughed, but it didn't sound like his heart was in it. "English, what is the month?"

Oh, boy, here we go, she thought. I did fall down one of Alice's rabbit holes.

Chapter 3

Drustan MacKeltar was worried. Although there was nothing he could put his finger on—apart from the remarkable fire she possessed, her shameless attire, and her unusual manner of speaking—he couldn't shake the feeling that an even more significant fact was eluding him. Initially, he'd thought mayhap he was no longer in Scotland, but then she'd informed him he was a mere three-day hike from his home.

Mayhap he'd lost several days, even a week. He shook his head, trying to clear it. He felt the same as he had once before when as a young lad he'd had a high fever and woken over a week later: confused, thick-witted, his normally lightning-fast instincts slowed. His reactions were further dulled because lust was thundering through his veins. A man couldn't think clearly when he was aroused. All his blood was being sucked to one part of his body, and while it was one of his finer parts, *cool* and *logical* didn't describe it.

The last thing he remembered, prior to awakening with the English lass sprawled so wantonly atop him, was that he had been racing toward the little loch in the glen behind his castle and growing unnaturally weary. From there, his memories were blurred. How had he ended up in a cave, a three days' hike away from his home? Why couldn't he remember how he had gotten here? He didn't seem to have suffered any injury; indeed, he felt hearty and hale.

He struggled to recall why he had been running toward the loch. He paused, as a tide of fragmented memories washed over him.

A sense of urgency... distant voices chanting... incense and snatches of conversation: *He must never be found*, and a curious reply, *We will hide him well*.

Had his petite English been there? Nay. The voices had been oddly accented, but not like hers. He quickly discarded the possibility that she had aught to do with his plight. She didn't seem the brightest lass, nor particularly strong. Still, a woman of her beauty didn't need to be; nature had given her all the gifts she needed to survive. A man would use all his skills as a warrior to protect such lush beauty, even had she been deaf and mute.

"Are you all right?" English nudged his shoulder. "Why did you stop, and please don't let the light go out. It makes me nervous."

Skittish as a foal, she was. Drustan pressed the tiny button again and flinched only mildly this time when the flame issued forth. "The month?" he asked roughly.

"September."

Her reply hit him like a fist in his stomach: the last afternoon he recalled had been the eighteenth day of August. "How near Mabon?"

She regarded him strangely, and her voice was strained when she said, "Mabon?"

"The autumnal equinox."

She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "It is the nineteenth of September. The equinox is the twenty-first."

Christ, he'd lost nearly a month! How could that be? He pondered the possibilities, sorting and discarding until he struck upon one that horrified him because it seemed the only explanation that fit the circumstances: once he'd been lured to the clearing, he'd been abducted. But assuming he had been abducted, how had he lost an entire month?

The unnatural exhaustion he'd experienced while running toward the glen suddenly made sense. Someone had drugged him in his own castle! That was how his captors had managed to take him, and apparently they'd been keeping him drugged.

And that someone could even now be returning to the cave to force him to slumber again. They would not find him so easy to take captive a second time, he vowed silently.

"Are you all right?" she asked hesitantly.

He shook his head, his thoughts grim. "Come," he warned before he dragged her along behind him.

She was so small that it would have been easier to toss her over his shoulder and run with her, but he sensed that she would vociferously resist such treatment and

he cared not to waste time arguing. She was fine-boned and petite, yet prickly as a hungry boar. She was also lushly curved and scandalously clad and stirred a cauldron of lustful urges in him.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. Whoever she was, wherever she was from, she was unaccompanied by a man, and that meant she was going home with him. The lass made his heart pound and his blood roar. When he'd awakened to find her on top of him, he'd responded fiercely. The moment he'd touched her, he'd been loath to let go, had slipped his hands up her silky legs and been captivated by the notion that mayhap she removed *all* her body hair. He would find out as soon as his plight permitted.

In the fierce Highlands of Scotland, possession was nine-tenths of the law, and Drustan MacKeltar was the other one-tenth: Drustan was *brehon*, or lawgiver. He could recite the lineage of his clan back for millennia, directly to the ancient Irish Druids of the *Tuatha de Danaan*—a feat worthy of a Druid bard. No one questioned his authority. He'd been born to rule.

"Whence do you hail, English?"

"My name is Gwen Cassidy," she said stiffly.

He repeated her name. " 'Tis a good name; Cassidy is Irish. I am Drustan MacKeltar, laird of the Keltar. My people made their home in Ireland for many centuries, before we took these Highlands as our home. Have you knowledge of my clan?"

Why had he been abducted? And once taken, why not killed? What must his father be making of his disappearance? Then a worse thought occurred to him: Was his father still alive and unharmed?

Fear for his father's safety gripped him, and he repeated his question impatiently, "Have you news of my clan?"

"I've never heard of your cl—family."

"You must hie from across the border. How came you here?"

"I'm on vacation."

"On what?"

"Vacation. I'm visiting," she clarified.

"Have you clan in Scotland?"

"No."

"Then whom do you visit? Who accompanies you?" Women did not travel without escort or clan, and certainly not dressed as she was. Although she'd knotted a blue fabric about her waist before they'd left the main cavern, it failed to conceal her shocking undergarments. The woman had no shame at all.

"No one accompanies me. I'm a big girl. I do perfectly well on my own."

There was a defiant note in her voice. "Have you any clan left alive, lass?" he asked more gently. Mayhap her family had been massacred and she displayed her body reluctantly, in hopes of finding a protector. She comported herself with the stiff bravado of an orphaned wolf cub, conditioned by savagery and starvation to snap at any hand, no matter that it might hold food.

She glared at him. "My parents are dead."

"Och, lass, I'm sorry."

"Shouldn't you be busy trying to find a way out of here?" she changed the subject swiftly.

He found the display of toughness, affected by a woman so obviously wee and helpless, touching. It was evident that the loss of her clan was still difficult for her to speak of, and far be it from him to press such a discussion. He knew too well the pain of losing a loved one. "Och, but'tis just ahead. See the daylight sifting through the stones? We can break through there." He let the flame go out, and they were swallowed by darkness, broken by a few thin trickles of light a dozen yards ahead.

As they drew nearer, Gwen eyed the rubble blocking the tunnel with disbelief. "Even *you* can't move those boulders."

She knew so little about him. The only question was whether he would do it using his body or his other... arts. Eager to be quit of the cave, he knew using

his Druid skills would be the fastest way out.

It would also be the fastest way to ensure he would *never* get her in his bed. A display of such unnatural power had driven three of his betrotheds from his life. The fourth had been killed two weeks past—nay, he amended, a month and a half ago if it was truly almost

Mabon—with his brother Dageus, who'd been escorting her to Castle Keltar for the wedding. He closed his eyes against a fresh wave of grief. It still *felt* like two weeks to him.

He'd never met his bride-to-be. Although he mourned her death, he grieved the loss of a potential wife, grieved the cutting short of so young a life, not the woman herself.

Dageus, on the other hand... Ah, that was a bitter and burning grief within his breast. He closed his eyes, firmly corralling the pain to be dealt with at a later time.

Since his brother had died, it was even more critical that he beget an heir. And soon. He was the last MacKeltar left to sire sons.

He glanced speculatively at Gwen.

Nay. He would use no Druid magic to move the stones in her presence.

He studied the stone blockade for a few moments before launching a simple physical assault. But he didn't merely put his arms into the job, he put his entire body into it, aware that she had dropped to her knees on the floor of the tunnel and was watching his every move. He might have flexed a bit more than necessary, to demonstrate what a prize she might enjoy in her bed. Anticipation was an important part of bed play and heightened the woman's ultimate satisfaction immeasurably. *Never* let it be said he wasn't an expert and attentive lover. The seduction began long before he removed a woman's clothing. Women might not like the thought of wedding with him, but they vied in masses for the pleasure of his bed.

Digging them out was a time-consuming task. From how tightly the stones were packed, the crevices between them sealed with the dust of time, he guessed this branch of the tunnel had collapsed a long time ago and been forgotten. He dug

and tossed and cleared out the smaller rocks before turning his attention to the larger ones, using his ax as a lever to push and roll them. Before long, he had cleared a small passage. Thick foliage camouflaged the opening, and he could see why the tunnel had been forgotten. What had once been an entrance lay secluded between boulders and covered by bramble. Who would think to look for a cave in such a place? It was apparent that he hadn't been brought in via this tunnel. That much foliage *couldn't* have grown in a month.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. She raised a guilty gaze from his legs, and he grinned. "You have naught to fear," he assured her. "Freeing us is easy. 'Tis the hike that will be tiring."

"What hike?"

He didn't bother to answer her but returned to his labor. The sooner they got out, the sooner he could devote attention to her seduction. Of course it would have to happen while they were traveling back to his castle, for he dare not waste time. After widening the opening, he used his sword to hack through the dense overgrowth obscuring the entrance. When he'd finally cleared a passage he deemed safe enough to accommodate them, she hurried to his side. He realized she would bolt out the opening and sprint away if he gave her the opportunity.

"Step back while I go through," he commanded.

"Ladies first," she said sweetly.

He shook his head. "You would bound off faster than a hare if I were such a fool." He grasped her shoulders and pulled her close. "I would advise against running from me. I would catch you easily, and the chase would only arouse me." When she tried to shrug his hands off her shoulders, he said, "Is this the fashion in which you thank me for freeing you?" he teased. "You might grant me a boon for my efforts." He rested his gaze on her lips, making it clear what boon he had in mind. When she wet them nervously, he dropped his head closer, taking it as a sign of compliance.

But the contrary lass flattened her wee palms on his cheeks and held him at bay. "Fine. Go first, then. Age before beauty," she added sweetly.

"Arrogant lass," he said with a snort, grudgingly admiring her audacity. "Give

me your pack." After producing the remarkable fire from within it, he was confident she wouldn't try to flee him without it in her possession.

"I'm not giving you my pack."

"Then you're not moving," he said flatly. "And the longer I stand here, in such tempting proximity—"

She smacked him in the chest with it, hard, and he laughed. Her cheeks flushed when he said, "Temper, temper, wee English. 'Tis truly most becoming to you." What a lovely spitfire she was, scarce taller than a child but voluptuously curved and plainly old enough for carnal pleasure.

Aye, he'd take her back to Castle Keltar; mayhap she would prove an amenable companion, mayhap more. Mayhap she could be his *fifth* betrothed, he thought wryly, and perchance he'd actually get her to the altar. He'd not met a woman so uncowed by him. It was refreshing. With his height and size, not to mention whispers circulating about the MacKeltar in the Highlands, he frightened lasses more oft than not.

He maneuvered himself through the opening, then took her hands and helped her scramble through, enjoying the feel of her small hands in his. Transferring his grip to her waist, he lifted her out. He didn't lower her to her feet right away but gazed challengingly into her eyes as he slid her down his body, enjoying the firm thrust of her nipples against his chest. The friction was delicious, and he felt her knees wobble for a moment before she found her feet.

If retreat was the measure of her desire, she desired him fiercely. She scrambled away from him with an alarmed expression the moment her toes touched the ground. He stared at her nipples, now puckered peaks beneath her chemise. She glanced down and defiantly crossed her arms across her lovely breasts, baring her teeth in a ferocious little scowl. He laughed, because she succeeded only in pushing the generous mounds together and up, increasing his desire to bury his face in her plump cleavage tenfold.

"I said doona run from me," he reminded. "You could not hope to outdistance me." He looked her up and down. Her skin—and he was seeing a splendid amount of it—was smooth and unscarred, bearing no sign of disease. Her waist was slim, her belly had the slight swell he adored on a wench, and although her

hips were lush, he suspected she'd not yet born bairn. The harsh light of day—oft unflattering to a wench—paid this one naught but tribute, and he bit back a groan. He'd not felt so intensely desirous of a woman ever before in his life.

"Stop looking at me like that," she snapped.

His gaze collided with hers; she had eyes the color of a wild Scottish sea, and there was clear evidence of a storm brewing in the icy blue depths. "Why are you so prickly, English? Is it because I am a Scot?"

"It's because you are overbearing, domineering, and pushy."

"I am a man," he replied easily.

"If men are allowed to behave in such an atrocious fashion, how are women supposed to act?"

"Appreciative. And among my clan we like them demanding in bed," he added with a smile. When her gaze grew even cooler, he said, "You do not respond well to a jest. Be easy, Gwen Cassidy I seek but to lighten your fears. You need fear naught, lass. I will care for you, despite your bad blood. Even the English can learn. On occasion," he added, just to provoke her.

She growled—actually growled low in her throat, as if he'd so irritated her that she'd like nothing more than to kick him. He found himself hoping she would. He was aching for an excuse to tussle with her and take her soft body down beneath his. Then he'd make her growl low in her throat for an entirely different reason: a moan of desire as he buried himself between her thighs.

But feeble-minded though she might be, she knew better than to provoke contact—he could see it in her storm-filled eyes. Her lack of intelligence didn't seem to have precluded common sense. He drew a deep breath of fresh air and smiled. He was free of the cave, alive, and would soon be home. He would uncover the traitors and reward himself with the feisty Briton. *Life was rich*, thought the laird of the MacKeltar.

Chapter 4

Not a woman prone to violence, Gwen was taken aback by her desire to kick Drustan MacKeltar. Not to slice and dissect him verbally, which would have been the mature thing to do, but to punch him, maybe even bite him the next time he touched her. Her mind went on instant, extended sabbatical, just looking at him. She'd never met a man so hopelessly chauvinistic. He provoked the worst in her, dragging her down to a level as base and primitive as his own. She wanted to launch herself at him and pummel him. He was behaving as if, because he'd found her atop him, he owned her. Scottish lords obviously hadn't changed much over the centuries.

She hadn't missed his proclamation that he was an authentic "laird"; rather, she'd chosen to ignore it. He'd seemed to expect a curtsy or maidenly swoon, and she would not pander to his conceit. It appeared that centuries of submission to the English hadn't taught the Scots one damn thing about submission. He was likely one of those stuffy aristocrats who was fighting to restore Scotland's independence so he could swagger about in his kilt and regalia like a little king. He even preferred the archaic manner of speech affected centuries past.

And he was definitely a womanizer. Smooth-talking, sexy, and entirely too touchy-feely. Probably dumb as a box of rocks, however, because all that brawn couldn't possibly couch too much brain.

"I have to return to the inn now," she informed him.

"There's no need for you to seek shelter in a common tavern. You will be generously housed in my demesne. I will see to your needs." Possessively, he cupped his hand at the nape of her neck, tangling his fingers in her hair. "I like the way you keep your hair. 'Tis unusual, but I find it most... sensual."

Bristling, she tossed her bangs out of her eyes. "Let's get something straight, MacKeltar. I am not going home with you. I am not going to bed with you, and I am *not* wasting one more moment arguing with you."

"I promise not to mock you when you change your mind, lass."

"*Oooh*. Contrary to what you might think, arrogance does not work as an

aphrodisiac on me." It was only a small lie. Arrogance alone didn't, but this particular arrogant man was a walking lollipop, and she was certain that latching her lips onto any part of him would satisfy the relentless oral craving she'd been fighting for ten days, seven hours, and forty-three minutes, not that she was counting.

"Aphro-di-si-ac," he repeated slowly, brows furrowed. He was silent a moment, then he said, "Ah, Greek: Aphrodite and *akos*. Mean you a love potion?"

"Sort of." How could he not know that word? she wondered, eyeing him warily. And why break it into *Greek* parts?

When he grinned cockily, she dropped her gaze and pretended a sudden fascination with her cuticles. The man was too damn sexy for his own good. And standing *way* too close.

He slid his hands into her hair and tugged gently, forcing her to look at him. His silver eyes glittered. "Tell me you doona feel mating heat between us. Tell me you doona desire me, Gwen Cassidy." His gaze dared her to lie.

Dismayed, she realized he could sense how much she wanted him, just as she could sense that he wanted to be all over her, so she did what handling insurance claims had taught her to do best: Deny, deny, deny.

"I *doona* desire you," she mocked lightly. Yeah, right. The sexual tension between them nearly qualified as a fifth force of nature.

He inclined his head. A dark eyebrow rose and his gaze was amused, as if he were somehow privy to her internal dissenting opinion. One corner of his mouth lifted in a faint smile. "When you finally speak the truth, it will be so sweet, wee English. It will make me hard as stone, the mere words upon your lips."

She felt it imprudent to point out that he already was. When he'd buried his hands in her hair, he'd brushed that part of him against her. She was shocked to realize she was actually contemplating having impulsive sex with him, trying to decide what was the worst that could happen if she did as many people she knew did—just hopped into bed with a stranger. God, he was so tempting. She wanted to experience passion, and when he looked at her the way he was looking at her right now, she felt an epiphany might be a hot, slippery kiss away.

But he was headstrong, too gorgeous for anyone's peace of mind, a wildly unpredictable variable in a risky equation, and she knew what those could do—create chaos. The nervous flutter in her stomach, the desire she felt was too novel a sensation for her to act upon it without careful consideration.

Although she wanted to change her life and was determined to lose her virginity, she was beginning to realize that it wasn't as easy to change one's ways as she'd thought it would be. *Thinking* about having sex with a virtual stranger was a whole lot different than actually plunging right into the heat and nakedness and rawness of it. Especially when that virtual stranger was so much man, a little odd, and a lot overwhelming. Her newfound feelings of desire scared her. The intensity of her body's reaction to him scared her.

Perhaps she could do it with him on the last day of her trip, she mused. He was certainly willing. She could have what she knew would be heart-pounding sex, then fly back home and never have to see him again. She'd bought condoms before leaving the States, and they were tucked safely in her pack...

Sheesh! Was madness contagious? What on earth was she thinking?

A brisk shake of her head restored her sanity.

"Come," he said.

I'd like to, but you're way too dangerous, she thought with a sigh.

Since he was heading down the hill in the general direction of the inn, she followed. "You don't have to hold my hand," she protested. "I'm not going to run off."

His eyes crinkled with silent amusement as he released her. "I enjoy holding your hand. But you may walk beside me," he informed her.

"I wouldn't walk anywhere else," she muttered. Behind would feed his ego, although she'd get to watch his incredible body, unobserved. In front, she'd be miserable, feeling his gaze on her. Beside him was the only tolerable place.

He took long strides, his natural pace a lope for her, but she refused to complain. The faster he walked, the more quickly she could surround herself with the safety of the teeming village. She'd never dreamed she'd be so grateful to see a

busload of senior citizens in her life.

Busy plotting her polite but hasty retreat from his presence, she didn't realize he'd stopped until he was quite some distance behind her. She turned and gestured impatiently, but his eyes were on the village below.

"Come on," she shouted. He didn't appear to hear her. She called for him again, waving her arms to get his attention, but he remained motionless, his gaze locked on the view.

Fine, she decided, *this is a great time to leave, and I have a head start*. She broke into a sprint down the sloping hillside. Stretching her legs, as if running for her very life, she suddenly felt silly. If the man had truly planned to harm her, he could have done so long before now. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was leaving something incredibly dangerous behind her on the hillside—far more than a simple man—and it was wiser that she did so now.

She ran for several seconds before the missile blasted her from behind. She stumbled and landed on her stomach in a springy patch of purple vetch, trapped beneath his body. He stretched her hands above her head and pressed her against the ground. "I said doona run from me," he gritted out. "Which word did you have difficulty with?"

"Well, you stopped moving," Gwen argued. "I called for you. And ouch, dammit, now I hurt all over."

When he didn't respond, only raised his body slightly off hers so she could breathe, she became aware of a subtle change in him. His heart was thundering against her back, his breathing was shallow, and his hands were trembling atop hers.

"Wh-what's wrong?" she asked faintly. What horror could make such strong hands tremble?

He pointed to a car, disappearing down the winding road beneath them. "What in the name of all that is holy is *that*?"

Gwen squinted. "It looks like a VW but I can't tell from this distance. The sun's in my eyes."

"A what?"

"Volkswagen."

"*A what* wagon?"

"*Volkswagen*. A car." Was the man going deaf?

"And that?"

His cheek brushed her temple as she turned her head to gaze where he pointed. "What?" She blinked owlishly. He appeared to be pointing at the inn. "The inn?"

"Nay, that bright thing with colors such as I have never seen. And what of all those leafless trees? What has happened to the trees? And why have they tied cords between them? Think you they will run away if not tethered? Never have I seen oaks so shamed!"

Gwen eyed the neon sign above the inn and the telephone poles in wary silence.

"Well, lass?" He took several slow deep breaths, then said unsteadily, "None of this was here before. I have seen naught of such oddities. It looks as if half the clans in Scotland have settled about Brodie's loch, and I am quite certain he wouldn't approve of all this. He is a most private man." He rolled off her and flipped her over, then pulled her up so she was on her knees facing him. He cupped her shoulders and shook her. "What is a car? What purpose has it?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake—you know what a car is! Stop pretending. You've been pretty convincing as the archaic lord, but don't play any more games with me." Gwen glared at him, but beneath her anger he was frightening her. He had the most bewildered expression on his face, and she thought she glimpsed a hint of fear in his brilliant eyes.

"What is a car?" he repeated softly.

Gwen began to make a caustic comment, then hesitated. Perhaps he was sick. Perhaps this situation was infinitely more dangerous than she thought. "It's a machine powered by... er... battery and gas." She abruptly decided to humor him, giving him the short answer. "People travel in them."

Soundlessly, his lips formed the words *battery* and *gas*. He was very still a

moment, then, "English?"

"Gwen," she corrected.

"Are you truly English?"

"No. I'm American."

"*American*. I see—well, not truly, but... Gwen?"

"*What?*" His questions were starting to scare her.

"In what century do I find myself?"

The breath locked in her throat. She massaged her temples, assailed by a sudden headache. It figured that a man who dripped such raw sex appeal had to be fatally flawed. She had no idea what to say to him. How did one answer such a question? Dare she get up and simply walk away, or would he tackle her again?

"I said, what century is it?" he repeated evenly.

"The twenty-first," she said, dosing her eyes. Was he playing a game? The bold block letters of a newspaper headline blossomed against the insides of her eyelids, crowding out all rational thought:

DROPOUT DAUGHTER OF WORLD-RENOWNED PHYSICISTS
ABDUCTED BY ESCAPED MENTAL PATIENT. SUBTITLED: SHE
SHOULD HAVE LISTENED TO HER PARENTS AND STAYED IN THE
LAB.

He fell silent, and when she opened her eyes he was scanning the village below: the boats on the loch, the buildings, the cars, the bright lights and signs, the bicyclists in the streets. He cocked his head, listening to the *blat* of horns honking, the buzz of motorbikes, and, from some cafe, the rhythmic bass of rock and roll. He rubbed his jaw, his gaze wary. After some time he nodded, as if he'd resolved an internal debate he'd been having. "Christ," he half-whispered, aristocratic nostrils flaring like a cornered animal. "I haven't lost a mere moon. I've lost *centuries*."

A mere moon? Centuries? Gwen pinched her lower lip between her finger and thumb, riveted.

Then he looked back at her, eyed her shirt, her pack, her hair, her shorts, and finally her hiking boots. He tugged her foot out from beneath her, held it in his hands and studied it for a long moment before raising his eyes to hers again. His dark brows dipped.

"You name your stockings?"

"What?"

He ran his finger over the words *Polo Sport* stitched on the thick woolen cuff of her sock. Then his gaze fixed on the small tab on her hiking boots: *Timberland*. Before she could form a reply, he said, "Give me your pack."

Gwen sighed and started to hand it to him, then unzipped the main pouch first, not in the mood to get into a discussion about zippers. Considering the one on her shorts—if he truly didn't know how they worked—she wasn't in a hurry to teach him. Women should sew padlocks on their zippers with him around.

He took the pack and dumped the contents on the ground. When her cell phone fell out, she was momentarily furious with herself for forgetting it, until she recalled that it wouldn't work in Scotland anyway. As he withdrew it from the jumble of her belongings, she realized it wouldn't work—ever again. The plastic casing had been crushed in one of her many falls, and it broke into pieces in his hands. He eyed the tiny technology inside with fascination.

He sorted through her cosmetics, pried open a compact, and regarded himself in the small mirror. Her protein bars were tossed aside along with the box of condoms (thank heavens), and when he spied her toothbrush, his bewildered gaze swept from her long, thick hair to the tiny brush and back to her hair again. One brow arched in an expression of doubt. He picked up the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan*, eyed the picture of the half-clad model on the cover, then fanned rapidly through it, gawking at the brilliantly colored pictures. He ran his fingers over the pages as if stunned. "And Silvan thinks his illuminated tomes are lovely," he muttered. When he started sorting through her brightly colored panties, she'd had enough. She dosed her fist over the lime silk thong he was currently examining and firmly shook her head.

But when he looked at her, she realized that for the first time since they'd met, seduction was not on his mind. Her desire to flee was abruptly vanquished by the

look of anguish on his face, and she wasn't so certain anymore that he was playing with her. If he was, he was a consummate actor.

Plucking the magazine from his hands, she pointed out the date in the corner. His eyes widened even further. "What century did you think it was?" she asked, disgusted with herself for being a sucker for a gorgeous man. He evidenced no intellect, had no redeeming qualities, yet drew her like a fluttery moth to a flame, and so what if she made ashes of her wings?

"The sixteenth," he replied hollowly.

He sounded so distraught that she touched him, brushing her fingers against his chiseled jaw, lingering longer than was wise. "MacKeltar, you need help," she soothed. "And we'll find you help."

He closed his hand over hers, turned his head, and kissed her palm. "My thanks. I am pleased you come so swiftly to my aid."

She withdrew her hand quickly. "Come with me to the village, and I'll get you to a doctor. You probably fell and have a concussion," Gwen said, hoping it was true. The alternative was that he had been wandering around, God only knew how long, thinking he was some medieval lord, and she just couldn't reconcile the powerful, arrogant man with a delusional paranoid schizophrenic. She didn't want him to be sick. She wanted him to be just as he appeared to be: competent and strong and healthy. It seemed impossible that a mental case could be so... commanding, regal.

"Nay," he said softly, his gaze drifting to the date on the magazine again. "We go not to your village, but to *Ban Drochaid*," he said finally. "And we haven't much time. It will be a hard journey, but I will tend you gently when we arrive. I shall see you handsomely rewarded for your assistance."

Oh, God, he meant to take her to his *castle*. He really *was* over the top. "I'm not going to those stones with you," she said as calmly as she could under the circumstances. "Let me take you to a doctor. Trust me."

"Trust *me*," he said, as he pulled her to her feet beside him. "I need you, Gwen. I need your help."

"And I'm trying to give it to you—"

"But you doona understand."

"I know you're sick!"

He shook his dark head, and in the late-afternoon light his silver eyes were clear, level, and intelligent. No crazed glimmer lurked there, only concern and determination. "Nay. I am well and in no way touched as you are thinking. You will simply have to see for yourself."

"I'm not coming with you," she said firmly. "I have other things to do."

"You must forgo them. The Keltar takes precedence, and in time you will understand. Now, I ask you a last time, do you come with me of your own free will?"

"Not a chance in hell, barbarian."

When he wrapped his hand about her wrist, she realized that while they were arguing he'd removed a chain of sorts from somewhere on his body. When he closed the metal links about her wrist and bound her to him, she opened her mouth to scream, but he clamped a powerful hand over her mouth.

"Then you come with me of my will alone. So be it."

Chapter 5

Nearly five hundred years, Drustan brooded. How could that be? He felt as if only yestreen he'd gone riding in the heather-filled Highland meadows of his home. His mind reeled from shock, and try though he might to deny it, he knew it was true. He knew it with a gnostic bone-deep knowing that was unquestionable. Her time felt different, the natural rhythm of the elements was frenetic, fractured. Her world was not a healthy one.

Centuries had passed, and he had no idea how it had happened. Probing his memory had yielded no additional facts. Five centuries of slumber seemed to have muted his memory, dimmed the events that had occurred just prior to his abduction. All he knew was that he'd been lured into some sort of ambush in which a number of people had participated. There had been armed men. There had been chanting and fragrant smoke, which reeked of witchcraft or Druidry. He'd obviously been drugged, but then what? Enchanted by a sleep spell? And if he'd been spelled, by whom? Still more important, why? The why of it would tell him if his entire clan had been targeted.

An icy finger of dread brushed his spine as he considered the possibility that they'd been attacked for the lore they protected.

Had someone finally believed the rumors and come seeking proof?

The Keltar males were Druids, as their ancestors had been for millennia. But what few knew was that they were not simple Druids, struggling with mostly incomplete lore since the loss of so much of it in the fateful war millennia ago. The Keltars possessed *all* the lore and were the sole guardians of the standing stones.

If after he'd been abducted, his father, Silvan, had been killed by his abductors, the sacred lore would be lost forever, and the knowledge they protected—to be used only when the world had dire need—vanquished utterly.

He glanced at Gwen. If she hadn't awakened him, he might well have slumbered for eternity! He murmured a silent prayer of thanks.

Pondering his situation, he realized that for now the how and why of his

abduction were irrelevant. He would find no answers in her time. What mattered was action: He'd been blessed enough to have been awakened and had both the chance and the power to correct things. Yet to do so, he must be at *Ban Drochaid* by midnight on Mabon.

He glanced at her again, but she refused to look at him. Dusk had long since fallen, and they'd made good time, putting many miles between them and the horrifying, noisy village. In the moonlight her smooth skin shimmered with the warm richness of pearl. He indulged himself, envisioning her nude, which wasn't hard to do when she wore so little. She was all woman and brought out the most primitive man in him, a fierce need to possess and mate. Her nipples were clearly visible beneath her thin shirt, and he ached to suckle them in his mouth. She was a fiery wee lass with a spine of steel and curves that would lure even his devout priest Nevin's gaze. He'd gotten hard the moment he'd opened his eyes and looked at her and had been uncomfortably erect since. One flirtatious glance from her would return him to a painful state, but he didn't worry overmuch that she might cast him such a look. She hadn't spoken to him in hours, not since he'd refused for the hundredth time to release her. Not since he'd told her he would toss her over his shoulder and carry her if he had to.

It intrigued him—that she'd neither screamed, nor fainted, nor pleaded for release. His first impression of her had not been entirely accurate; although it was difficult to discern, what with her strange manner of speaking, she *did* possess a dash of intelligence. She'd demonstrated fine reasoning abilities while trying to talk him out of taking her along, and when she'd realized there was no possibility of him relenting, she'd treated him as if he simply didn't exist. *Bravo, Gwen, he thought. Cassidy is Irish for clever. Gwendolyn means goddess of the moon. Quite a fascinating lass you're turning out to be.*

Whereas initially he'd thought her an orphan or survivor of a clan massacre, a woman willing to barter her body to secure a protector—thus explaining her clothing and demeanor—it had since occurred to him that she might simply be typical of her time. Mayhap in five centuries women had changed this much, become tenaciously independent. Then why, he wondered, did he sense a silent sadness, a brush of vulnerability in her that belied her bravado?

He knew she thought that he'd dragged her off because he desired her, and would that it were that simple. There was no denying that he found her mesmerizing

and was impatient to bed her, but things were suddenly much more complicated. Once he'd discovered he was stranded in the future, he'd realized he *needed* her. When they arrived at the stones—if the worst was true and his castle was gone—there was a ritual he must perform, his conscience be damned. There was a possibility the ritual would go wrong, and if that happened, he needed Gwen Cassidy standing by his side.

She was growing weary, and he felt a pang of regret for causing her distress. When she stumbled over a tree root and fell against him, only to hiss and jerk away, he softened. He would give her this one night, for after tomorrow there would be no stopping. She nearly fell where she stood, so he cupped one arm behind her shoulders, the other behind her knees, and deposited her on the mossy trunk of an enormous tree that had fallen to the floor of the forest. Perched upon the massive trunk, with her feet dangling several inches above the ground, she looked wee and delicate. Warrior hearts did not always come in warrior-strong bodies, and although he could hike three days without rest or food, she would not fare well under such conditions.

He boosted himself up onto the trunk beside her.

"Gwen," he said gently.

There was no response.

"Gwen, I truly will not harm you," he said.

"You already have," she retorted.

"You're speaking to me again?"

"I'm chained to you. I had planned to never speak to you again, but I've decided that I don't feel like making things easy for you, so I'm going to tell you incessantly and in vivid detail precisely how miserable I am. I'm going to stuff your ears with my shrill complaints. I'm going to make you wish you'd lost your hearing when you were born."

He laughed. This was his scornful English again. "You are free to torment me at every opportunity. I regret causing you discomfort, but I must. I have no choice."

She arched one brow and regarded him with disdain. "Let me be certain I

understand this situation. You think you are from the sixteenth century. What year, exactly?"

"Fifteen hundred and eighteen."

"And in fifteen hundred and eighteen, you lived somewhere near here?"

"Aye."

"And you were a lord?"

"Aye."

"And how is it that you ended up sleeping in a cave in the twenty-first century?"

"That is what I must discover."

"MacKeltar, it's impossible. You seem relatively sane to me, this delusion excluded. A bit chauvinistic, but not too abnormal. There is no way a man can fall asleep and wake up nearly five centuries later. Physiologically, it's impossible. I've heard of Rip Van Winkle and Sleeping Beauty, but those are fairy tales."

"I doubt the fairy had aught to do with it. I suspect gypsies or witchcraft," he confided.

"Oh, now, that's infinitely reassuring," she said, too sweetly. "Thank you for clarifying that."

"Do you mock me?"

"Do you believe in fairies?" she countered.

"Fairy is merely another name for the *Tuatha de Danaan*. And yes, they exist, although they keep their distance from mortal man. We Scots have always known that. You have lived a sheltered life, have you not?" When she closed her eyes, he smiled. She was so naive.

She opened her eyes, favored *him* with a patronizing smile, and changed the subject as if not wont to press his fragile mind too hard. He bit his lip to prevent a derisive snort. At least she was talking to him again.

"Why are you going to *Ban Drochaid*, and why do you insist on taking me with you?"

He weighed what he might safely tell her without driving her away. "I must get to the stones because that is where my castle is—"

"Is, or was? If you expect to convince me you are truly from the sixteenth century, you're going to have to do a little better with your verb tenses."

He glanced at her reprovably. "Was, Gwen. I pray it stands still." It must be so, for if they arrived at the stones and there was no sign of his castle, his situation would be dire indeed.

"So you're hoping to visit your descendants? Assuming, of course, that I'm playing along with this absurd game," she added.

Nay, not unless his father, at sixty-two, had somehow managed to breed another bairn after Drustan had been abducted, which was highly unlikely since Silvan had not tugged a woman since Drustan's mother had died, as far as Drustan knew. What he was hoping for was some of the items in the castle. But he couldn't tell her any of that. He couldn't risk scaring her off when he needed her so desperately.

He needn't have bothered searching for a suitably evasive reply, because when he hesitated too long for her liking, she simply forged ahead with another question. "Why do you need me?"

"I doona know your century, and the terrain between here and my home may have changed," he offered the incomplete truth smoothly. "I need a guide who has knowledge of this century's ways. I may need to pass through your villages, and there could be dangers I would not perceive until it was too late." That sounded rather convincing, he thought.

She was regarding him with blatant skepticism.

"Gwen, I know you think that I've lost my memory, or am ill, and am having fevered imaginings, but consider this: What if you are wrong, and I am telling the truth? Have I harmed you? Other than making you come along with me, have I injured you in any way?"

"No," she conceded grudgingly.

"Look at me, Gwen." He cupped her face with his hands so she had to look directly into his eyes. The chain rattled between their wrists. "Do you truly believe I mean you ill will?"

She blew a strand of hair out of her face with a soft puff of breath. "I'm chained to you. That worries me."

He took a calculated risk. With an impatient movement he released the links, counting on the mating heat between them to keep her from outright fleeing. "Fine. You are free. I misjudged you. I believed that you were a kind and compassionate woman, not a fainthearted lass who cannot abide anything that she does not immediately understand—"

"I am not fainthearted!"

"—and if a fact doesn't adhere to your perception of how things should be, then it cannot be." He gave a derisive snort. "What a narrow vision of the world you have."

"Oh!" Gwen scowled, scooting away from him on the fallen tree trunk. She swung one leg across it, straddling the massive trunk, and sat facing him. "How dare you try to make me feel bad for not believing your story? And I assure you, I do *not* have a narrow view of the world. I'm probably one of the few people who doesn't. You might be astounded by how broad and well-informed my vision of the world is." She massaged the skin on her wrist, glaring at him.

"What a contradiction you are," he said softly. "At moments I think I see courage in you, then at others I see naught but cowardice. Tell me, are you always at odds with yourself?"

A hand flew to her throat and her eyes widened. He'd struck something sensitive. Ruthlessly he pursued it: "Would it be so much to ask that you give a bit of your precious time to help someone in need—the way they wish to be helped, rather than the way you think they *should* be helped?"

"You're making it sound like everything is my fault. You're making it sound like *I'm* the one who's crazy," she protested.

"If what I say is true, and I vow it is, you do seem most unreasonable to me," he said calmly. "Has it occurred to you that I find your world—without any knowledge of the ancients, with limbless, leafless trees and clothing with formal appellations—as unnatural as you find my story?"

Doubt. He could see it on her expressive face. Her stormy eyes widened further, and he glimpsed that mysterious flash of vulnerability beneath her tough exterior. He disliked provoking her, but she didn't know what was at stake and he couldn't possibly tell her. He didn't have time to go out into her world and seek another person. Besides, he didn't wish any other person. He wanted her. She'd discovered him, she'd awakened him, and his conviction that she was supposed to be involved in helping him correct things increased with each passing hour. *There are no coincidences in this world, Drustan, his father had said. You must see with the eagle's eye. You must detach, lift above a conundrum, and map the terrain of it. Everything happens for a reason, if you can but discern the pattern.*

She massaged her temples, scowling at him. "You're giving me a headache." After a moment, she blew out a resigned breath, fluffing her bangs from her eyes. "Okay, I give up. Why don't you tell me about yourself. I mean, who you *think* you are."

A rather begrudging invitation, but he would work with what he could get. He hadn't realized how tense he had been, awaiting her response, until his muscles smoothed beneath his skin. "I have told you that I am the laird of my clan, despite the fact that my father, Silvan, still lives. He refuses to be laird anymore, and at three score and two I can scarce blame him. 'Tis a long time to bear such responsibility." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I had a brother, Dageus, but he died recently."

He didn't mention that his betrothed had been killed while accompanying Dageus back to Castle Keltar for the wedding. The less said about any of his betrotheds to another woman, the better. He was touchy about the entire subject.

"How?" she asked gently.

"He was returning from the Elliott's estate when he was killed in a clan battle that wasn't even our own but between the Campbell and the Montgomery. Most likely, he saw the Montgomery was severely outnumbered and tried to make a difference."

"I'm so sorry," she said softly.

He opened his eyes to find compassion shimmering in her gaze, and it warmed him. When he lowered himself from the massive trunk of the fallen tree and pulled her leg over the trunk so she faced him, she didn't resist. With him standing on the ground and her perched upon the trunk, they were at equal eye level, and it seemed to make her feel more comfortable. "Dageus was like that," he told her with a mixture of sorrow and pride. "He was ever one to fight others' battles. He took a sword through the heart, and one bitter morn I woke up to the sight of my brother, trussed across the back of his horse, being escorted home by the captain of the Elliott guard." *And grief rips at my heart. Brother of mine, I failed both you and Da.*

Her brows puckered, mirroring his sorrow. "Your mother?" she asked gently.

"My father is widowed. She died in childbirth when I was fifteen; neither she nor the babe survived. He has not remarried. He vows there was only one true love for him." Drustan smiled. His da's sentiment was one he understood. His parents' match had been made in heaven: he a Druid and she the daughter of an eccentric inventor who'd scoffed at propriety and educated his daughter better than most sons. Unfortunately, educated lasses were hardly in abundance in the Highlands, or anywhere else for that matter. Silvan had been lucky indeed. Drustan had longed for such a match himself, but time had worn him down, and he'd given up hope of finding such a woman.

"Are you married?"

Drustan shook his head. "Nay. I would not have tried to kiss you were I betrothed or wed."

"Well, score one point for men in general," she said dryly. "Aren't you rather old never to have been married? Usually when a man hasn't married by your age, there's something wrong with him," she provoked.

"I've been betrothed," he protested indignantly, not about to tell her the number of times. It wasn't a fine selling point, and she was closer to the truth than he would have liked. There was indeed something wrong with him. Once women spent a bit of time with him, they packed up their bags and left. It was enough to make a man feel uncertain of his charms. He could see she was about to press

the issue, so he said hastily, hoping it would end the discussion of the subject, "She died before the wedding."

Gwen winced. "I'm so sorry."

They were silent a few moments, then she said, "Do you *want* to get married?"

He arched a teasing brow. "Are you offerin' for me, lassie?" he purred. If only she would, he'd like as not snatch her up and marry her before she could change her mind. He found himself more intrigued by her than he'd ever been with any of his betrotheds.

She flushed. "Of course not. I'm merely curious. I'm just trying to figure out what kind of man you are."

"Aye, I wish to wed and have bairn. I simply need a good woman," he said, flashing her his most charming grin.

She wasn't unaffected by it. He saw her eyes widen slightly in response and she seemed to forget the question she'd been about to ask. He breathed a silent thank you to the gods who'd gifted him a handsome face and white teeth.

"And what would a man like you consider a good woman?" she said after a moment. "Wait"—she raised a hand when he would have spoken—"let me guess. Obedient. Adoring. Definitely not too bright," she mocked. "Oh, and she'd just have to be the most gorgeous woman around, wouldn't she?"

He cocked his head, meeting her gaze levelly. "Nay. My idea of a good woman would be one I loved to look at, not because another found her lovely, but because her unique characteristics spoke to me." He brushed the corner of her mouth with his fingers. "Mayhap she would have a dimple on one side of her mouth when she smiled. Mayhap she would have a witch-mark"—he slid his hand up to the small mole on her right cheekbone—"high upon one cheek. Mayhap she would have stormy eyes that remind me of the sea I so love. But there are other characteristics far more important than her appearance. My woman would be one curious about the world, and like to learn. She would want children and love them no matter what. She would have a fearless heart, courage, and compassion."

He spoke from the heart, his voice deepening with passion. He freed what was

bottled up inside him and told her exactly what he wanted. "She would be one who would talk with me into the wee hours about anything and everything, who would savor all the tempers of the Highlands, who would treasure family. A woman who could find beauty in the world, in me, and in the world we could make together. She would be my honored companion, adored lover, and cherished wife."

Gwen drew a deep breath. The skeptical look in her eyes faded. She shifted uncomfortably, glanced away from him, and was silent for a time. He didn't interrupt, curious to see how she would respond to his honest declaration.

He smiled wryly when she cleared her throat and glibly changed the subject.

"Well, if you're from the sixteenth-century Highlands, why don't you speak Gaelic?"

Give nothing away, lass, he thought. *Who or what hurt you that makes you so conceal your feelings?* "Gaelic? You wish Gaelic?" With a wolfish smile, he told her exactly what he wanted to do to her once he removed her clothing, first in Gaelic, then in Latin, and finally in a language that had not been spoken in centuries—not even in his time. It made him hard, saying the words.

"That could be gibberish," she snapped. But she shivered, as if she'd sensed the intent behind his words.

"Then why did you test me?" he asked quietly.

"I need something to prove it," she said. "I can't just go on blind faith."

"Nay," he agreed. "You doona seem to be a woman who could."

"Well, *you* had proof," she countered, then added hastily, "of course, pretending that what you claim is true. You saw cars, the village, my phone, my clothing."

He gestured at his attire, his sword, and shrugged.

"That could be a costume."

"What would you consider sufficient proof?"

She folded her arms across her chest. "I don't know," she admitted.

"I can prove it to you at the stones," he finally said. "Beyond any doubt, I can prove it to you there."

"How?"

He shook his head. "You must come and see."

"You think your ancestors might have some record of you, a portrait or something?" she guessed.

"Gwen, you must decide whether I am mad or I am telling the truth. I cannot prove it to you until we reach our destination. Once we reach *Ban Drochaid*, if you still doona believe me, there at the stones, when I have done what I can to offer you proof, I will ask nothing more of you. What have you to lose, Gwen Cassidy? Is your life so demanding and full that you cannot spare a man in need a few days of your time?"

He'd won. He could see it in her eyes.

She looked at him in silence for a long time. He met her gaze steadily, waiting. Finally she gave a tight nod. "I will make sure you get to your stones safely, but that doesn't mean for a minute that I believe you. I am curious to see what proof you can offer me that your incredible story is true, because if it is..." She trailed off and shook her head. "Suffice it to say, such proof would be worth hiking across the Highlands to see. But the moment you show me whatever it is you have to show me, if I still don't believe you, I'm done with you. Okay?"

"Okay?" he repeated. The word meant nothing to him in any language.

"Do you agree to our deal?" she clarified. "A deal you agree to honor *fully*," she stressed.

"Aye. The moment I show you the proof, if you still doona believe, you will be free of me. But you must promise to stay with me until you actually *see* the proof." Deep inside, Drustan winced, loathing the carefully phrased equivocation.

"I accept. But you will not chain me, and I must eat. And right now I am going for a short walk in the woods, and if you follow me it will make me very, *very* unhappy." She hopped down from the fallen tree trunk and skirted around him,

giving him wide berth.

"As you wish, Gwen Cassidy."

She stooped and reached for her pack, but he moved swiftly and wrapped his hand around her wrist. "Nay. If you go, it stays with me."

"I need a few things," she hissed.

"You may take one item with you," he said, reluctant to interfere if she had womanly needs. Mayhap it was her time of the moon.

Angrily, she dug in the pack and withdrew two items. A bar of something and a bag. Defiantly, she stuffed the bar in the bag and said, "See? It's only one thing now." She turned abruptly and headed for the woods.

"I'm sorry, lass," he whispered when he was certain she was out of hearing range.

He had no choice but to make her his unwitting victim. Larger issues than his own life depended upon it.

* * * * *

Gwen hurriedly used the "facilities," anxiously scanning the forest around her, but it didn't appear that he had followed her. Still, she didn't trust a thing about her current situation. After relieving herself, she devoured the protein bar she'd grabbed. She rummaged through her cosmetics bag, flossed, then dabbed a touch of toothpaste to her tongue. The taste of mint boosted her flagging spirits. A swipe of a medicated pad over her nose, cheeks, and forehead nearly made her swoon with pleasure.

Sweaty and exhausted, she felt more alive than ever. She was beginning to fear for her own sanity, because there was a part of her that wanted to believe him, wanted desperately to experience something outside of her everything-can-be-explained-by-science existence. She wanted to believe in magic, in men who made her feel hot and weak-kneed, and in crazy things like spells.

Nature or nurture: Which was the determining factor? She'd been obsessing over that question lately. She knew what nurture had done to her. At twenty-five, she had a serious intimacy problem. Aching for a thing she couldn't name, and terrified of it at the same time.

But what was her nature? Was she truly brilliant and cold like her parents? She recalled all too well the time she'd been foolish enough to ask her father what love was. *Love is an illusion clung to by the fiscally challenged, Gwen. It makes them feel life might be worth living. Choose your mate by IQ, ambition, and resources. Better yet, let us choose him for you. Already I have several suitable matches in mind.*

Before she'd indulged in her Great Fit of Rebellion, she'd dutifully dated a few of her father's choices. Dry, intellectual men, they'd regarded her more often than not through eyes red-rimmed from constant peering into a microscope or textbook, with little interest in her as a person, and great interest in what her formidable parents might do for their careers. There'd been no passionate declarations of undying love, only fervent assurances that they would make a brilliant team.

Gwendolyn Cassidy, the sheltered daughter of famous scientists who had elevated themselves from stark poverty as children to esteemed positions at Los Alamos National Laboratory doing top-secret quantum research for the Department of Defense, had had a nearly impossible time getting a date outside of the cliquish scientific community in which she'd been raised. At college it had been even worse. Men had dated her for three reasons: to try to get in good with her parents, to see if she had any theories worth stealing, and, last but not least, for the prestige of dating the "prodigy." Those few who'd been attracted by her other endowments (translated: generous C cups) hadn't lingered long after learning who she was and what courses she was acing while they were hardly managing to skate by.

She'd been frighteningly cynical by twenty-one.

She'd dropped out of the doctorate program at twenty-three, carving an irrevocable schism between herself and her parents.

Lonely as hell by twenty-five. A veritable island.

Two years ago, she'd thought changing jobs—taking a nice, normal, average job with nice, normal, average people who weren't scientists—would fix her problems. She'd tried so hard to fit in and build a new life for herself. But she'd finally realized it wasn't her career choice that was the problem.

Although she'd told herself that she'd come to Scotland to shuck her virginity, the small deception was how she concealed her deeper and much more fragile motives.

The problem was—Gwen Cassidy didn't know if she had a heart.

When Drustan had spoken so passionately of what he was looking for in a woman, she'd nearly flung herself at him, madman or no. Family, talking, taking quiet pleasure in the simple lush beauty of the Highlands, having children who would be loved. Fidelity, bonding, and a man who wouldn't kiss another woman if he were wed. She sensed that Drustan was a bit of an island himself.

Oh, she knew why she'd really come to Scotland—she needed to know if love really was an illusion. She was desperate to change, to find something to shake her up and make *her feel*.

Well, this certainly qualified. If she wanted to become a new person, what better way to start than to force herself to completely suspend disbelief, throw caution to the wind. To toss aside all that she'd been raised to believe and plunge into life, messy as it was. To rescind control over what was happening around her and entrust that control to a madman. Raised in an environment where intellect was prized above all else, here was her chance to act impulsively, on gut instinct.

With a *gorgeous* madman, at that.

It would be good for her. Who knew what might come of it?

She could feel a perfectly vicious cigarette craving coming on.

* * * * *

"Come," he said, when she returned. He'd built a fire in her absence, and she considered asking for her lighter back but was too exhausted to summon up the energy for a potential ownership dispute. Violating her privacy utterly, he'd rummaged through her pack and created a paltry bed by strewing her previously clean clothing upon the ground. A recent acquisition—a vibrantly crimson thong, adorned with black velvet silhouettes of romping kittens—poked out from between a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans. She spent a moment calculating the odds that he would pull out the only thong she'd bought but never worn—the thong she planned to wear when she lost her virginity.

Inconceivable. She glared suspiciously at him, certain he'd displayed her panties on purpose, but if so, he was the picture of innocence.

"I cannot procure food for you this night," he apologized, "but we will eat in the morning. For now, you must sleep."

She said nothing, merely cast an irritable glance at her clothes, strewn across twigs, leaves, and dirt. Further irritating her, he was standing at the perimeter of the light cast by the flames, making it difficult to see him clearly. But she didn't miss that lazily sensual, lionlike toss of his head that sent his silky dark hair falling over his shoulder. It *screamed* come hither, and pissed her off even more.

He met her glare with a provocative smile and gestured toward her clothing. "I made you a pallet upon which to sleep. In my time I would spread my plaid for you. But I would also warm you with the heat of my naked body. Shall I remove my plaid?"

"No need to bother," she sputtered hastily. "My clothes are fine. Wonderful. Really."

Despite the abysmal lowlands of her emotions and feverish highlands of her hormones, she was bone-weary and desperate for the plateau of sleep. She'd gotten more exercise today than she got in a month at home. The small pile of her clothing near the fire suddenly seemed as inviting as a down bed. "What about you?" she asked, reluctant to sleep if he was going to be awake.

"Although you doona believe me, I slept for a very long time and find I am most reluctant to dose my eyes again. I shall stand watch."

She regarded him warily and didn't move.

"I would be pleased to give you something to help you relax," he offered.

Her brows furrowed. "Like what? A drug or something?" she asked indignantly.

"I have been told I have a calming effect with my hands. I would rub your back, caress your hair until you drifted peacefully."

"I don't think so," she said icily.

A quick white flash of teeth was the only indication she had that he was amused.

"Then I bid you, lie down before you fall down. We must cover a great deal of ground tomorrow. Although I could carry you, I sense you would not appreciate it."

"Damn right, MacKeltar," she muttered, as she relented and dropped to the ground near the fire. She bundled her button-down into a pillow of sorts and stuffed it under her head.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked softly out of the darkness.

"I am downright toasty," she lied.

And in truth, she shivered for only a short time before inching closer to the fire and falling into deep and dreamless oblivion.

* * * * *

Drustan watched Gwen Cassidy sleep. Her blond hair, streaked with darker and lighter highlights, shimmered in the firelight. Her skin was smooth, her lips lush and pink, the lower one quite a bit fuller than the top. Kiss-ably full. Above almond-shaped eyes, her dark-blond brows arched upward at the outer edges, adding an aristocratic disdain to the scowl she so frequently wore. She was lying on her side, and her plump breasts pressed together in dangerously tempting curves, but it wasn't her physical attributes alone that stirred him.

She was the most unusual woman he'd ever encountered. Whatever had shaped her temperament, she was a curious blend of cautiousness and audacity, and he'd begun to realize she had a clever and quick mind. So wee, she was unafraid to thrust her chin in the air and shout at him. He suspected that audacity was more her nature, while her cautiousness was a learned thing.

Her audacity would serve her well in the trials to come, and there would be many. He poked at his memory fragments, which were still frighteningly incomplete. He had two days to reclaim perfect recall. It was imperative that he isolate and study every detail of what had happened prior to his enchantment.

With a heavy sigh, he turned his back to the fire and stared out into the night at a world he didn't understand and had no desire to be a part of. He found her century unsettling, felt bombarded by the unnatural rhythm of her world, and was comforted by the knowledge that he wouldn't have to spend too much longer

in it. As he listened to the unfamiliar sounds of the night—a humming in the air few would hear, a strange intermittent thunder in the sky—he reflected upon his training, sifting through neatly compartmentalized vaults of information stored in his mind.

Precision was imperative, and he subdued a surge of unease. He'd never done what he would soon have to do, and although his upbringing had prepared him for it, the possibility for error was immense. His memory was formidable, yet the purpose for which he'd been trained had never taken into account the possibility that he would not be at Castle Keltar when he performed the rite, and thus would not have access to the tablets or any of the books.

Although it was widely believed that Druidry had waned—leaving only inept practitioners of lesser spells—and that the ancient scholars had forbidden writing of any kind, both beliefs were myths that had been cultivated and spread by the few remaining Druids themselves. It was what they *wished* the world to believe, and Druids were ever adept at illusion.

On the contrary, Druidry thrived, although the prone-to-melodrama British Druids scarce possessed the knowledge to cast an effective sleep spell, in Drustan's estimation.

Many millennia ago, after the *Tuatha de Danaan* had left the mortal world for stranger haunts, their Druids—mortals and unable to accompany them—had vied among themselves for power.

There had ensued a protracted battle that had nearly destroyed the world. In the horrifying aftermath, one bloodline had been selected to preserve the most sacred of the Druid lore. And so the Keltar's purpose had been mapped out. Heal, teach, guard. Enrich the world for the wrong they'd done it.

The fabulous and dangerous knowledge, including sacred geometry and star guides, had been carefully inked in thirteen volumes and upon seven stone tablets, and the Keltar Druids guarded that bank of knowledge with their souls. They tended Scotland, they used the stones only when necessary for the world's greater good, and they did their best to quell the rumors about them.

The ritual he would perform at *Ban Drochaid* required certain formulas that must be without error, and he was uncertain of three of them. The critical three. But

who would ever have believed he would be trapped in a future century? If they arrived at the stones and Castle Keltar was gone and the tablets were missing—well, that was why he needed Gwen Cassidy.

Ban Drochaid, his beloved stones, were the white bridge, the bridge of the fourth dimension: time. Millennia ago, Druids had observed that man could move in three ways: forward and back, side to side, up and down. Then they'd discovered the white bridge, whereupon they could move in a fourth direction. Four times a year the bridge could be opened: the two equinoxes and the two solstices. No simple man could avail himself of the white bridge, but no Keltar had ever been simple. From the beginning of time, they had been bred like animals to be anything but.

Such power—the ability to travel through time—was an immense responsibility. Thus they adhered unfailingly to their many oaths.

She thought him mad now; she would surely abandon him if he overburdened her mind with more of his plans. He couldn't risk telling her anything else. His Druid ways had made too many women flee him already.

For what time they had left together in her century, he'd like to continue seeing that glimmer of desire in her gaze, not revulsion. He'd like to feel like a simple man with a lovely woman who wanted him.

Because the moment he finished the ritual, she would fear him and mayhap—nay, assuredly—hate him. But he had no other choice. Only the ritual and a fool's hopes. His oaths demanded he return to avert the destruction of his clan. His oaths demanded he do whatever was necessary to accomplish that.

He closed his eyes, hating his choices.

If Gwen had awakened during the night, she would have seen him, head tossed back, gazing up at the sky, speaking softly to himself in a language dead for thousands of years.

But once he'd spoken the words of the spell to enhance sleep, she slept peacefully until morning.

SEPTEMBER 20

10:02 A.M.

Chapter 6

Gwen had never felt so acutely five foot two and three-quarter inches in her life as she did trailing behind the behemoth who didn't understand the concept of physical limitations.

As she stretched her legs, swinging her arms to generate greater forward momentum—fully aware of how futile the effort was because momentum was contingent upon mass, and his mass was three times hers, ergo, he could outwalk her to infinity barring any unforeseen complications—her temper snapped.

"MacKeltar, I'm going to *kill* you if you don't slow down."

"I am curious to know how you plan to do so, when you can't even pace me," he teased.

She was not in the mood for teasing. "I'm tired and I'm *hungry*!"

"You ate one of those bars from your pack a scarce quarter hour past, when we stopped to examine your map and plot the fastest course," he reminded.

"I'm hungry for real food." *And I'm going to need it*, she thought with a sinking feeling, for the tourist map in her pack had indicated the fastest course from their current location to *Ban Drochaid* was eighty miles, cross-country.

"Shall I snare and spit a rabbit for you?"

A bunny? Was he serious? *Eww*. "No. You should stop at the next village. I can't believe you didn't let me go into Fairhaven. We were right there. There was coffee there," she added plaintively.

"To reach *Ban Drochaid* by tomorrow, we must travel without pause."

"Well, *you* keep stopping to pick up those stupid stones," she grumbled.

"You will understand the purpose of my stupid stones tomorrow," he said, patting his sporran, where he'd stored them.

"Tomorrow. You'll show me tomorrow. Everything will be explained tomorrow. I don't live for tomorrow, and you require a lot of faith, MacKeltar," she said,

exasperated.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Aye, I do, Gwen Cassidy. But I give much in return to those people who have faith in me. I could carry you, if you wish."

"I don't think so. Why don't you just slow down a bit?"

He stopped, evidencing the first hint of impatience she'd glimpsed. "Lass, if that map you have is correct, we have until the morrow's eve to travel a distance of nearly eighty miles. That is three of your miles per hour, without stopping to sleep. Although I could run much of the way, I know you cannot. If you can manage four miles each hour, you may rest later."

"That's impossible," Gwen gasped. "The fastest mile

I've ever run on a treadmill was ten and a half minutes and I nearly died. And it was only *one* mile. I had to rest for hours and eat chocolate to revive myself. MacKeltar, we need to rent a car," she tried again. Earlier, upon discovering the length of the hike he planned, she'd proposed the alternative, but he'd simply dammed up and dragged her off at a brisk pace. "We could travel eighty miles in one *hour* in a car."

He glanced at her and shuddered. "I trust my feet. No wagons."

"Come on," she nearly wailed. "I can't keep up with you. It would be a simple matter. We can go down into the next village, rent a car, drive to your stones, and you can show me whatever it is this afternoon."

"I cannot show you until tomorrow. It would be without merit to arrive today."

"You said you needed to stop at the castle. If we walk the whole way, that's not going to give you any time to visit your old stomping ground," she pointed out.

"I doona stomp there, nor do I stomp much of anywhere, woman. *You* drive me to stomp." A muscle in his jaw jumped. "You must walk more quickly."

"You're lucky I'm moving at all. Haven't you heard of Newton's First Law of Motion? It's *inertia*, MacKeltar. An object that's at rest wants to *stay* at rest. I can't be expected to overcome laws of nature. That's why exercising is so difficult for me. Besides, I think you're afraid." Gwen felt a little guilty for

playing fast and loose with Newton, but most people had no idea what she was talking about when she brought up the laws of motion, and rather than reveal their ignorance and argue with her, they usually dropped the subject. Dirty pool, but startlingly effective. She'd avail herself of anything that would get her out of walking eighty *freaking* miles.

He was staring at her strangely, with a mixture of startlement and confusion. "I know naught of this Newton, but'tis clear he failed to attain a complete understanding of objects and motion. And I am hardly afraid of one of your foolish wagons."

He'd never heard of Isaac Newton? Where had the man been living? In a cave?

"Wonderful," she pounced. "If you're not afraid, then let's return to Fairhaven and I'll rent a car. I'll even pay for it myself. We'll be at your castle by lunchtime."

He swallowed hard. He really did have an aversion to cars, she realized. Exactly the kind of aversion a man from five hundred years in the past might evidence. Or, she thought cynically, the type of aversion displayed by an actor who had given his performance much thought, down to the minute details. A small, wicked part of her longed to wedge the oversize package of testosterone into a little bitty compact car and see just how far he would carry the performance.

"Let me help you, MacKeltar," she coaxed. "You asked for my help. All I'm trying to do is get you to the castle faster than you could possibly get there yourself. Besides, there's no way I'm going to be able to walk for two days straight. Either we get a car, or you can just forget about me."

He blew out a frustrated breath. "Fine. I will travel in one of your wagons. You are right in thinking that I need time to prepare, and'tis plain to see that you doona intend to exert any effort to increase your pace."

Gwen smiled all the way back to Fairhaven. She would get Band-Aids for the blisters on her heels where her hiking boots chafed. She would get coffee and chocolate and scones for breakfast. She would buy him clothes, rent a car, and return him to his family, who would figure out what was wrong with him. It was shaping up to be an acceptable day after all, she thought, sneaking a glance at the luscious man who was walking much slower now—in fact, dragging his feet

beside her. He looked miserable. She didn't laugh, because she knew she must have worn an identical expression when they'd been traveling in the opposite direction.

The morning was steadily improving. The patch she'd put on earlier while she'd freshened up in the woods was working nicely. Nicotine hummed through her veins and she was no longer quite so worried that she might, in a fit of irritability, hurt the next person she saw or, worse, suffering oral withdrawal, do something with, or to, some part of Drustan MacKeltar she would regret. She was going to survive and she was again in control.

Control is everything, her mother, Elizabeth, had often said in that dry, chilly British voice of hers. *If you control the cause you own the effect. If you don't, events will unfold like dominoes toppling and you will have no one to blame but yourself.*

Oh, do hush up, Mother; Gwen thought mulishly. Her parents were dead and still running her life. Still, Elizabeth had been making a valid point. It was only because Gwen had been distracted by the state of her emotions—a thing Elizabeth had never permitted—that she'd carelessly plunked her backpack down without first examining her surroundings. Had she been paying attention, she would not have placed the pack in such a precarious position. But she had, and it had fallen out of reach, and she'd ended up in a cave. That single moment of carelessness had gotten her stuck in the Highlands with a very ill or very deranged man.

It was too late for regret. She could only exercise damage control. Now she was the one stretching her legs, urging him to walk faster. He did so in brooding silence, so she used the quiet time to firm her resolve that he was not a potential cherry picker.

They made it back to Fairhaven in under an hour, and she sighed with relief at the sight of cozy inns, bike and car rentals, coffee shops, and stores. She was no longer alone with him, confronted by the constant temptation to part with her virginity or start smoking again, or both. They would zip into the stores and collect—*oh!*

She stopped and eyed him with dismay. "You can't come any further, MacKeltar. There's no way you can walk into the village looking like that." Sinfully

gorgeous, the half-clad warrior could not mingle with tourists looking like a medieval terrorist.

He glanced down at himself, then at her. "More of me is covered than you," he said with an indignant and utterly regal sniff.

Figured the man would even *sniff* like royalty. "Maybe. But you're covered all wrong. Not only are you a walking weapon factory, you have nothing but a blanket wrapped around you." When he scowled, she hastened to assure him, "It's a very nice blanket, but that's not the point."

"You will not leave me, Gwen Cassidy," he said quietly. "I will not have it."

"I gave you my word that I would help you get to your stones," she reminded.

"I have no way of gauging the sincerity of your word."

"My word is good. Besides, you have no other choice."

"But I do. We walk" He took her hand and started to drag her back the way they'd come.

Gwen panicked. There was no way she was walking for two days. No way in hell. "All right," she cried. "You can come. But you've got to get rid of those weapons. You can't saunter into Fairhaven with an ax on your back, a sword at your waist, and fifty knives."

His jaw tightened and she could see he was preparing a list of protests.

"No," she said, raising a hand to cut him off. "One knife. You may keep one knife and that's it. The rest of it stays here. We will come back for it once we have a car. I can explain your costume by telling people you are working on one of those battle-reenactment thingies, but I will not be able to explain so many weapons."

With a gusty sigh, he removed his weapons. After depositing them beneath a tree, he moved reluctantly toward the village.

"Uh, excuse me," she said to his back.

"What now?" He stopped and glanced back at her, dearly exasperated.

She gazed pointedly at the sword, which he hadn't removed.

"You said one knife. You didn't specify what size it should be."

There was a dangerous glint in his gaze and, realizing she'd pushed him as far as he would bend, she acquiesced. She'd just say the sword was part of the costume. She glanced at it, wishing those glittering gems in the hilt looked less real. They could end up getting mugged for some silly fake sword.

* * * * *

At the rental agency, Gwen leased the last, dilapidated little car and arranged to collect it in an hour, which would give them ample time to purchase clothing, food, and coffee before leaving for Alborath. Guiding him past the curious stares of the onlookers, and occasionally tugging on his arm when he stopped to stare, she finally got him into Barrett's, a sporting-goods store that had the obligatory tourist's miscellany of other items.

In no time he would be presentable. People would stop gawking at him as he passed before turning their scrutiny to her, as if trying to figure out what a perfectly normal-looking, albeit a bit grubby, American was doing strolling about with such a barbarian. They would stop drawing attention to themselves—a thing Gwen despised—and they would take a nice drive to Alborath. Perhaps have lunch with his family while she explained how she'd found him. She'd entrust him to his familial bosom and then catch up with her tour group in the next village.

Do you really want to leave him? Return to the seniors?

After last night she was no longer certain she would be able to leave him. Perhaps she'd linger for a time near his home and see how he fared before moving on. It wasn't as if there was anything in the States she was in a hurry to get back to. Not her job, not the exquisite, sprawling house on Canyon Road in Santa Fe she'd avoided since her parents' death. Too many memories, still fresh and painful.

Perhaps she would check into a bed-and-breakfast near Drustan's home for a while; it would be the compassionate thing to do.

"Where are you going?" she hissed when he swept past her, trailing his hand

over a rack of purple running suits. He brushed his hand over a lavender sweatshirt, then stared at a lilac sweatband, ignoring her. She shook her head but, after a moment's vacillation, decided he should be harmless enough wandering the store while she selected something for him to wear.

She turned her attention to choosing clothing for a man who had the overly developed body of a professional athlete. Although Barrett's carried a variety of clothing, few men had his height and muscle. She tucked some jeans beneath an arm, eyed a denim button-down, and glanced at his wide shoulders. It'd never fit. A V-neck T-shirt might do, in stretchy cotton, but definitely not white. It would contrast entirely too nicely with his silky dark hair and deep golden skin. The sight of a white tee stretched across his muscular chest might persuade her to catapult her cherry at him.

She *felt* him return to her. The hair on the back of her neck tingled the moment he stepped beside her, but she refused to glance at him. At the same moment, a feminine purr from the other side of her asked, "May I help you?"

Gwen glanced up from the pile of T-shirts to find a tall, leggy, thirtyish saleslady, librarian glasses perched on her nose above a lushly pursed mouth, looking past her, eyeing the MacKeltar with fascination. "Wearing the old dress, are you now?" she spoke with a lilting burr, ignoring Gwen entirely. "Such a lovely weave. I've no' seen the pattern before."

Drustan folded his arms across his chest, his body rippling beneath the leather bands. "And you won't," he said. " 'Tis the Keltar's alone."

There went the lionlike toss of his head, which on a woman would have looked coy but on him was an irresistible come-hither-if-you-think-you-can-handle-me. Gwen didn't wait for the saleslady to start drooling. Or go hither. She thrust a pile of jeans and shirts into Drustan's arms, forcing him to unfold his arms and drop the he-man pose.

"Allow me to show you to a fitting room," the saleslady purred. "I'm quite confident we'll find something to satisfy your... desires... at Barrett's."

Oh, choke me on innuendo, Gwen thought, not caring one bit for the interest in the woman's eyes. He might be crazy, but he was *her* deluded hunk. *She'd* found him.

Blocking the aisle to prevent—she glanced at the woman's name tag—Miriam from latching on to him, she nudged Drustan toward the dressing room. Miriam sniffed and tried to step around her, but Gwen engaged her in a determined, irritated little dance in the narrow aisle until she heard Drustan close the dressing-room door behind her. Plunking her fists on her waist, Gwen looked down her nose up at leggy Miriam and said, "We lost our luggage. His costume was all he had in his carry-on. We don't need any help."

Miriam glanced at the fitting room, where Drustan's muscular calves were visible beneath the short white slatted door, then contemptuously examined Gwen, from her not-very-recently shaped eyebrows to the muddy toes of her hiking boots. "Found yourself a Scotsman, did you now, wee *nyaff*? You Americans are given to samplin' our men with the same thirst you turn to our whisky, and you canna handle our whisky either."

"I can most certainly handle my *husband* from here," Gwen snapped, louder than she would have liked.

Miriam directed a pointed look at her ringless hand and arched a meticulously shaped brow that made Gwen feel she had small, unruly bushes growing above her eyes, but she refused to be humbled and returned the stare in icy silence. When Gwen made no effort to explain why she sported no wedding band and displayed no inclination to quit blocking the aisle, Miriam moved off in a snit to fluff and tidy the sweaters Gwen had messed up on the display table.

Swallowing a catlike growl, Gwen moved to stand guard outside the fitting room, tapping her foot impatiently. A *swoosh* of fabric alerted her that he'd removed his plaid, and Gwen tried hard not to think about him standing behind the flimsy door, nude. It was harder than trying not to think about a cigarette, and her disobedient thoughts handled it as badly: The more she tried to *not* think it—the more she thought it.

"Gwen?"

Dragging herself from a fantasy in which she was about to drip chocolate syrup on him, she said, "Um?"

"These trews... *och!* By Amergin!"

Gwen snorted. The MacKeltar was pretending to discover zippers, and if he was wearing the plaid true to the sixteenth century (according to what their tour guide had told them), he had no underwear on. She heard a few more muttered curses, then a *zzzzzzp!* Yet another curse. He sounded *so* convincing.

"Come out and let me see you," she said, struggling to keep a straight face.

His voice sounded strangled when he replied, "You'll have to come in."

Sneaking a furtive glance at Miriam, who had conveniently been accosted by a pimple-faced teenage boy, Gwen entered the dressing room. He was regarding himself in the mirror and his back was to her, and, heavens, but she would have been much better off if she'd *never* seen his tight muscled ass in a pair of tight faded jeans. His long black hair rippled over his shoulders and down his back, inviting her to plunge her fingers in it and trail them down the splendid ridges of muscle—

"Turn around," she said, her mouth suddenly dry.

He did so, with a scowl.

She eyed his bare chest and, with effort, forced herself to remember she was supposed to be looking at the jeans. Her gaze skimmed downward over his rippled abdomen and lean hips and—

"*What* have you stuffed in your pants, MacKeltar?" she demanded.

"Nothing that wasn't God-given," he replied stiffly.

Gwen stared. "There's no way that's part of you. You must have gotten a sock or... something... stuck. Oh, my." She pried her gaze from his groin. A muscle worked in his jaw, and he was dearly in discomfort.

"I doona believe you *intended* to torture me—nay, I saw other men on the street in such clothing—so I will not take putative measures. However, I think the problem is much the same as my feet," he informed her.

"Your feet?" she repeated dumbly, her gaze dropping. They *were* large.

"Aye." He gestured toward hers. "In your time you bind your feet in constrictive boots, whereas we wear soft, supple leather."

"Your point?" she managed.

"They have more room to grow," he said, as if she were simpleminded.

Gwen blushed. Of all things to play a joke on her about. Stuffing socks in his pants, indeed! "MacKeltar, I do not believe for one minute that *that*"—she gestured at the bulge in his jeans—"is you. I may be gullible, but I do know what men look like, and that is not what men look like."

He flattened her up against the door of the dressing room, and his sensual mouth, much too close for safety, curved in a cocksure smile. "Then you will simply have to see for yourself. Touch me, lass. Feel my... sock." His silver gaze sizzled with challenge, as he unzipped his zipper.

"Uh-uh." She shook her head for added emphasis.

"Then find me a pair of trews that doona threaten to sever my manparts."

"Uh-huh," she agreed, trying not to think about that unzipped zipper.

"Doona let this frighten you, lass. We will fit together well when I make love to you," he purred.

Wed was how it came out, and his lovely brogue, coupled with his "sock," were nearly all the persuasion she needed to set to removing his jeans with her teeth. She closed her eyes. "Back up, bud, or I'll *help* you fit in those trews," she threatened. "With your sword, if necessary."

"Look at me, Gwendolyn," he said softly.

"Gwen," she snapped.

"Gwen," he acquiesced. Right before he kissed her.

Chapter 7

Heat lightning, Gwen thought. *His touch is electrifying*. Attraction sizzled between them, and she knew he felt it too, because he drew back and looked at her strangely. Then, nudging her lips apart with his thumb, he opened her mouth and brushed his firm lips back and forth over hers, creating a light and irresistible friction.

Yes, she thought. *This is what I've needed. I feel... ooh!* He tilted her head at the perfect angle—just like Lancelot did Guinevere in that single kiss between them in the movie *First Knight*—and sealed his mouth over hers. She shivered when his tongue plunged between her lips, hot and silky and raw man.

Take that, Miriam.

Dizzied by a rush of desire, her head plopped limply back against the dressing-room door. She slid her hands up the rippling muscles of his arms, over his shoulders, then locked them firmly behind his neck. She hadn't gone to Scotland, fallen in a hole, and met a madman. She'd died and gone to heaven, and he was her reward for putting up with her parents for so many years. He closed his hands on her waist, then slid them intimately upward as he deepened the kiss, lingering over each curve. When he flattened his palms roughly over her breasts, her thighs popped open so smoothly that she wondered why she didn't just have a placard taped across them that said SQUEEZE HERE FOR SEX. She arched her back, rubbing her hard nipples against his callused palms. The sock she'd accused him of having was the hardest sock she'd ever felt and dangerously close to being smack-dab between her thighs.

And she wanted him there, by God.

She wanted to feel him silky and hot inside her, naked, with nothing between them.

He brushed her nipples with his thumbs as his tongue glided deeper, slick and hungry, so deep it coaxed soft little mewling noises from her throat. With a subtle turn of their bodies, he shifted his erection into the vee of her thighs and thrust his hips with the same ruthless, insistent rhythm as he thrust his tongue into her mouth. When he cupped her bottom and lifted her against him, she

vaulted happily onto him, wrapped her legs around his waist, and kissed him frantically.

She arched against him, trying to get as close as possible, with so much irritating, restrictive clothing between them. She threaded her fingers into his silky hair, she suckled his tongue, desperate for more of him. He made a kind of laughing, satisfied male sound deep in his throat, clamped her head between his hands, and kissed her so hard he drew her breath into his body. His tongue glided into her mouth, withdrew, and returned. She felt her skin rippling with kinetic energy where he touched her; she was soaking it up and growing hotter at the core. This man knew her natural frequency and was making her resonate to perfect pitch. And as fine crystal, if vibrated continuously at its natural frequency, would shatter, she hovered mere caresses away from a similar explosion.

"Might I find you a different size or style?" chirped Miriam beyond the dressing-room door, inspiring the only benevolent feeling Gwen would ever entertain about her, for rescuing her before she shucked her virginity on a fitting-room floor to a madman. With a door that ended a foot above the floor.

Drustan groaned, then deepened the kiss.

How embarrassing! Gwen's sanity returned in degrees. *The man kisses me and I just hop right on him like he's the hottest new ride at Disneyland. Have I lost my mind?* She dug her fingernails into his shoulders and bit his tongue.

"Ouch. I doona think that was necessary," he whispered, passion blazing in his eyes, coupled with irritation that someone had dared interrupt them. He was clearly not a man who liked to stop anything he'd begun. He looked downright dangerously aroused.

"Ma'am?" Miriam said in a pinched tone.

Gwen was mortified to realize she was making soft panting noises. She took a deep breath, forced herself to unwrap her legs, and slid down his body. His hands tightened on her hips, until she threatened his shoulders with her nails again. Reluctantly, he lowered her to the floor, then promptly tried to kiss her again. "Stop it," she whispered furiously.

After drawing another shaky breath she called to Miriam, "Yeah. Um. Clothes,

right. How about... uh, a pair of those khakis. The loose-fit brand in a thirty-two—wait a minute." She shook her head, trying to clear it. To accommodate his muscular thighs, they would have to be loose on his waist. "Bring a thirty-four, thirty-six-, and thirty-eight-inch waist," she corrected.

"And a belt." She closed her eyes and drew several more deep breaths. Her heart was thundering like a battering ram against the wall of her chest.

"Ma'am?" Miriam cooed so sweetly that only another woman would have heard the bitchiness.

"Yes?"

"I realize Americans are... *different*... and perhaps your feet were no longer on the floor because you were perched on the chair admirin' the state-of-the-art video-cams we recently installed, but there are children in the store, and in Scotland we take the upbringin' of them seriously. These dressing rooms are not coed."

Her face flamed. "Get off me, you oaf," she hissed, pushing at his chest. He gave her a look that promised they would continue where they'd left off—and soon—before stepping back.

"As you wish. *Wife*," he purred, then opened the door with a flourish and a courtly bow.

Gwen blushed. So much for hoping he hadn't heard her snap at Miriam earlier. She stepped out, and there stood the infernal Miriam, staring past her at Drustan MacKeltar clad in tight unzipped jeans and no shirt. "Oh, my." Miriam wet her lips. "I'll just get those khakis."

But Miriam didn't move an inch, and Gwen wanted to kick her. Better yet, smack her eyeballs back into her head.

"You were going to get those pants," Gwen reminded stiffly.

"Oh, yes," Miriam said, flustered. "If the khakis don't cover... er, fit... perhaps he could try running pants. They're quite... roomy." She flashed a brilliant smile at Drustan, her gaze darting from the barely covered bulge at his groin to his ringless hand.

"Fine. Bring some of those too." Gwen glared at

Drustan, then pulled the door tightly shut. She leaned back against it and sighed, trying to collect herself.

"I want purple trews, lass," Drustan called over the door.

"No," she said irritably.

"And a purple shirt."

Absolutely not, she thought. His black hair and dark skin would look incredible offset by such a vibrant color. Maybe black would make him look drab. One could always hope. When, after a few moments and unintelligible curses later, she heard his jeans hit the floor, she imagined him nude and wondered if someone might have slipped her an aphrodisiac in the past twenty-four hours.

Find a man you want to talk with into the wee hours, a man you can argue with when necessary, and a man who makes you sizzle when he touches you, Beatrice had said. Well, the sizzle was there, and they certainly could argue...

She shook her head, refusing to entertain the notion that a madman might be her potential soul mate.

Might he have a point about his feet? Did things truly grow larger if unconfined? It certainly hadn't felt like a sock. More like that can of tennis balls on the shelf behind the cash register. She glanced down at her breasts. Should she stop wearing a bra and start wearing snigger panties?

How was she going to look at him now?

* * * * *

The running pants were tolerable, Drustan decided, relieved. The blue trews had dearly been a torture device and would have strangled a man's seed. Mayhap men were fashioned differently in her time. He hadn't seen one other bulge out there on the street; mayhap they all had wee carrots in their trews. Mayhap there were hundreds of unsatisfied women in this century. Although at the moment, only one woman's satisfaction was of paramount interest to him, and he was rapidly becoming obsessed with her.

Gwen Cassidy did something unnatural to him. Made him feel weak-kneed and powerful at the same time. Made him feel the potency and virility of his Druid blood hammering in his veins. When he touched her, everything in the world made perfect sense, as if constructed of elegant mathematical equations. He should fear her because, when holding her, he forgot everything he should be worrying about.

Druids maintained that the larger an object, the more impact that object had upon the space in which it existed, and the greater the pull it exerted on other objects. Drustan had always considered himself walking proof of such a postulation; but Gwen, tiny Gwen, had very little mass, yet a monumental impact on his world. She defied the laws of nature.

Sighing, he forced his thoughts away from her firm little body and studied himself in the mirror. The black trews (named Adidas) were fitted yet baggy, with remarkable, stretchy stuff at the waist and ankles. They were by far the most suitable selection. He admired the black fabric, densely woven; he suspected it might repel water. Purple would have been better, but black was acceptable. Not royal—still, not serf colors.

The blue trews had been painful, and a terrible dye job to boot, as if the color hadn't set in. No weaver in his clan would have owned up to such terrible craft. And those bland "khaki" trews, although a reasonable fit, would have branded him a crofter, which the Keltar wasn't. His own plaid of royal purple and black, shot with costly silver threads, he rolled neatly around three of his leather bands and stuffed under his arm. Her people clearly did not adhere to *brehon* law. There'd been racks of purple attire, for simply anyone to purchase, arrayed throughout the store. The Keltar, centuries past and with much pomp and ceremony, had been gifted the full use of the seven colors by a Gael king. The MacKeltar lairds were entitled to wear purple so long as a Keltar lived.

And by God, he did—live, that is. Mayhap none other of his clan did, but he was alive, and once he got to his stones he would find out what had gone wrong. He was apprehensive about this world of hers, this wagon of hers, but to arrive at Castle Keltar today he would have ridden a fire-breathing dragon.

He prayed that by some miracle Silvan might have lived and fathered children—even at his advanced age, it wasn't impossible—and that he would find descendants alive and well. He prayed that if not, he would at least find his

castle unscathed by time, that he would secure the tablets and by midnight tomorrow eve be standing safely in his own century again. No abrasive noises, no awful odors, no unnatural rhythm of Gaea herself.

Kicking aside the hard white shoes with strings that she'd thrust under the door moments ago, he put his boots back on. He balled his fists inside the T-shirt, having absolutely no idea why it was called a T-shirt as opposed to an A-shirt or a B-shirt, and stretched the fabric so it wasn't quite so restrictive around his neck and chest.

Opening the door, he paused a moment and swept his gaze over her petite, shapely body. They would fit well, although he suspected she wouldn't believe that until he demonstrated, and he hoped to demonstrate many times.

He *liked* Gwen Cassidy—prickly, stubborn, a touch domineering and bossy—in addition to aching to rip her clothes off and push her down on her back in sweet heather. Spread her legs and tease until she begged for him. Bury his face between her breasts and taste her skin. Their kiss had only whetted his appetite for her and he groaned, recalling how difficult it had been to peel those blue trews down over his swollen shaft.

He stood in the doorway, looped his sporran about his hips, fastened one of his leather bands atop it, and thrust his sword through it. He moved silently behind her and dosed his hands on the slender span of her waist. Grinning, he slipped his hands lower. She had a luscious ass, soft and womanly and shaped like a plump upside-down heart, and he'd take advantage of every opportunity to touch it. He was about to press a finger intimately between her twin globes when she tensed and shot out of his grasp.

He arched a brow at the saleslady. "My *wife* is still growing accustomed to me. We haven't been wed long." Hmm, he quite liked the way "wife" had sounded on his tongue, he thought, eyeing Gwen.

"Nice sword," the saleslady purred, looking nearly a foot to the left of it.

Gwen pivoted on her heel. "Come on," she said to Drustan. "*Husband*." The look he gave her sizzled with passion, and she was beginning to wonder just how long she was going to be able to keep him under control. *If* she'd ever really had him under control to begin with.

"I'd like to grow accustomed to you," Miriam murmured, as she watched the magnificent man guide his wife out the door with a possessive palm to the small of her back.

He tossed her a flirtatious grin over his shoulder.

* * * * *

Gwen's spirits lifted a few blocks from the cafe, buoyed by the tantalizing aroma of fresh-ground coffee beans wafting on a gentle breeze. In a matter of moments she would be ordering cappuccino and chocolate bread. Cranberry-and-orange scones. Gwen released a heartfelt sigh of pleasure as they entered the cafe.

"Lass, there are so many people," Drustan said uneasily. "Does the entirety of this village belong to one laird?"

Gwen glanced at him and decided she should have gone with the white T-shirt, because Drustan MacKeltar, clad from head to toe in unbroken black, was, as her girlfriend Beth would say, *just downright fuckable*. She was still experiencing shivers of resonance from their kiss that were never going to stop unless she quit looking at him, so she glanced hastily around the shop. Families with children, seniors, and young couples—mostly tourists—were seated at dozens of small tables. "No, they're probably all from different families."

"And they're *peaceable*? All these different clans eat together and are *happy* about it?" he exclaimed, at sufficient volume that several people turned to look at them.

"Shh... you're drawing attention to us."

"I always draw attention. Even more so in this time. Wee little folks, the lot of you."

She glared at him. "Just be quiet, behave, and let me order."

"I *am* being have," he muttered, then moved away to gawk at the shiny silver machines grinding and perking and steaming.

Being have, with a long A? His command of language baffled her. But then she thought about it a moment: be good—being good; be quiet—being quiet; behave—being have. There was an unsettling consistency to his madness. What was it

Newton had said? *I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies but not the madness of people.*

While Gwen ordered, Drustan circled the interior of the coffee shop, missing nothing. He seemed fascinated by everything, picking up stainless-steel mugs, turning them around and upside down, sniffing the bags of coffee beans, poking at the straws and napkins. Then he found the spices. She caught up with him at the condiment stand just as he was slipping the little jars of cinnamon and chocolate in the pocket of his running pants.

"*What* are you doing?" she whispered, removing the lids from their coffee. She angled her back so the patrons of the cafe couldn't see that he was breaking the law. "Take those out of your pocket!"

He scoffed. "These are valuable spices."

"You would steal?"

"Nay, I'm no thief. But this is cinnamon and cocoa. 'Tis not so easy to come by, we're nearly out, and Silvan loves it."

"But it's not yours," she said, trying to be patient.

"I am the MacKeltar," he said, dearly trying to be patient. "Everything is mine."

"Put them back."

His grin was pure male challenge. "*You* put them back."

"I am not rooting around in your pockets."

"Then they stay where they are."

"You are *so* stubborn."

"I am? I? Woman who insists everything be her way?" He fisted his hands at his waist and shifted his voice into a higher octave, imitating her: "You must wear hard white shoes. You must remove your weapons. You must travel in a car. You must not kiss me even though I wrap my legs around you when you do." Shrugging irritably, he reverted to his deep brogue. "Must must *must*. I weary of that word."

Cheeks flaming over the jibe about her unruly legs,

Gwen thrust her hand in his pocket and closed her fingers around the small glass bottles.

"Silvan will be most unhappy," he said, stepping closer with a wolfish smile.

"Silvan died five centuries ago, according to you." The moment she said the words, she regretted them. A flash of pain crossed his face, and she could have kicked herself for being so callous. If he was ill, he might genuinely believe everything he was telling her, and if so, the death of his "father"—real or imagined—would hurt him.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. She sprinkled cinnamon on their frothy cappuccinos. Then, to atone for her unkind words, she slipped the bottle back in his pocket, trying to ignore the dually disturbing facts that she was aiding and abetting a criminal and that she was so close to his "sock," which rhymed nicely with *cock*, and oh, it had been an eyeful in those jeans.

Angrily, he plunged his hand into his pocket, pulled both bottles out, and plunked them on the little condiment stand. Without a word, he turned his back to her and stalked out the door.

Gwen hastened after him, and as she passed a table where a distinguished-looking man sat with his wife and son, she heard the boy say, "Can you believe they were going to steal the cinnamon and chocolate? They didn't look poor. Did you see his sword? Wow! It was better than the Highlander's!"

Embarrassed, Gwen tucked the bag of pastries beneath her arm, juggled both cups of coffee, and struggled with the door.

"Drustan, wait. Drustan, I'm sorry," she called to his broad, stubborn back.

He stopped midstep, and when he turned around he was smiling. Was that how brief the duration of his anger? She caught her breath and held it. He was simply the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, and when he smiled...

"You like me."

"I do not," she lied. "But I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

He was undaunted. "Aye, you like me, lass. I can tell. You called me by my given name and you are frowning, with dewy eyes. I forgive you for being cruel and thoughtless."

She changed the subject hastily and addressed something that had been bothering her since they'd left Barrett's and that snooty Miriam. "Drustan, what does *nyaff* mean?"

He looked startled, then laughed. "Who dared call you a wee *nyaff*?"

"That snotty woman in Barrett's. And quit laughing at me."

"Och, lass." More laughter.

"Well, what does it mean?"

"Do you wish the whole gist of it, or a simple one-word summary? Not that I can think of one at the moment," he added. "It's a uniquely Scots word."

"The whole gist of it," she snapped.

Eyes sparkling, a brow mischievously arched, he said, "As you wish. It means one who is irritating, much like a midge, one whose capacity to annoy and inspire contempt exceeds her diminutive size but not the cockiness that accompanies it."

Gwen was seething by the time he finished. She turned around and stomped back toward Barrett's to tell perfectly plucked Miriam precisely what she thought of her.

"Hold, lass," he said, catching up with her and closing his hand about her upper arm. " 'Tis plain to see she was merely jealous of you," he told her soothingly, "for having a fine braw man such as me at your side, especially after she beheld me in those blue trews."

Gwen plunked her fists at her waist. "Oh, could you *be* any more pleased with yourself?"

"You're no *nyaff*, lass," he said, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "She was like as not far more envious of the look on my face when I gaze upon you."

Well. Her sails deflated. Gwen felt suddenly much more charitable toward Miriam, and it must have shown on her face because he smiled arrogantly.

"Now you like me even more."

"I do not," she said, stiffly pulling her arm from his grasp. "Let's go get that rental car and get out of here."

God forgive her, she was beginning to more than like him. She was feeling territorial, protective, and downright lusty.

SEPTEMBER 20

7:32 P.M.

Chapter 8

One flat tire—in the company of a man who had no idea how to change one, and no jack—a pit stop for his weapons, three rest stops, four coffees, and a very late lunch later, they arrived at the outskirts of Alborath just as dusk was falling.

Gwen sneaked a glance at him and wondered if the color would ever return to his face. She'd pushed the shuddering car up to seventy but quickly relented when he'd gripped the sides of his seat so tightly that if she'd tapped him with a fingernail, he might have shattered.

It was a good thing she'd slowed down, because the tire had gone flat two miles outside of Fairhaven, and they'd had to walk back and get a person from the rental agency to arrange for a serviceman to get the tire changed. She'd tried to rent a different vehicle, but as all were under contract, it was this one or none until tomorrow evening.

Tire changed, they'd resumed their drive, and eventually he'd relaxed enough to turn his attention to the coffee and pastries. After complaining because she'd gotten no kippers and tatties, he'd consumed the coffee and chocolate with gusto. The pleasure he'd exhibited over such mundane items had further irritated her. God help her, but she was nearly beginning to believe him. They hadn't talked much on the drive, although not for her lack of trying. He simply hadn't seemed able to relax enough to speak.

Now, as the lights of Alborath came into view, nestled in a lush valley, his complexion was ghastly in the gloaming.

"Would you like to stop in the village?"

"Nay," he replied tersely. He pried his fingers from the edge of the seat and pointed to a road north of the village. "You must guide this metal beast to the crest of that ben."

Gwen eyed the mountain to which he pointed. There were two hundred seventy-seven mountains in Scotland, so said her brochure, that exceeded three thousand feet, and he was pointing to one of them. Sighing, she circled the village, downshifting when she reached the mountain. She'd been hoping to coax him to

have dinner and secure a reprieve before confronting the extent of his delusions.

"Tell me about your home," she urged. The day had been a trial for both of them, and she felt a sudden spear of concern. She was about to take him "home," and what if there wasn't one there? What if the next few hours critically stressed his already damaged mind? She was supposed to stay with him until tomorrow night to see his proof, although technically she'd fulfilled her end of the bargain: She'd gotten him safely to *Ban Drochaid*.

She had a feeling *technically* didn't mean much to a man of his ilk.

"Doona think you'll be leaving me now," he said, placing his hand over hers on the gear stick

Gwen glanced sharply at him. "What are you? A mind reader?"

He half-smiled. "Nay. I'm merely reminding you that your bargain with me was that you would stay to see my proof. I will not let you fail me now."

"What are you going to do, chain me again?" she said dryly.

When he didn't answer, she took another look at him. God above, but the man looked dangerous. His silver-metal eyes were cool and frighteningly calm and—yes, he would chain her again. For a split second, in the eerie, bruised half light of gloaming, he looked as if he had truly stepped forward five centuries, a barbaric warrior intent on his quest, and nothing or no one would get in his way.

"I have no intention of reneging," she said stiffly.

"I assume *reneging* means to act with dishonor?" he said flatly. "Good, for I would not permit it."

They drove in silence for a time.

"Do you enjoy a bard's rhymes, Gwen?"

She glanced sharply at him. "I have been accused of enjoying poetry from time to time." *Romantic poetry, the kind never read at Chez Cassidy when I was a child.*

"Would you grant me a boon?"

"Sure, why not," she said with a sigh a martyr would envy. "I've already done fifty gazillion, what could one more possibly hurt?"

He gave her a faint smile, then spoke quietly and dearly: *"Wither thou goest, there goest I, two flames sparked from but one ember; both forward and backward doth time fly, wither thou art, remember."*

She shrugged, confused. It had started out rather romantic, but hadn't ended that way. "What does it mean?"

"Have you a good memory, Gwen Cassidy?" he evaded.

"Of course I do." *Oh, God, he was losing it.*

"Re-say it to me."

She looked at him. His face was pale, his hands fisted in his lap. His expression was deadly serious. For no other reason than to appease him, she made him repeat it, then repeated it without error. "Is there a point to this?" she asked when she'd said it three times, perfectly. It was permanently etched in her mind.

"It made me happy. Thank you."

"That seems to have become my purpose in life," she said dryly. "Is this another one of those things that will become clear to me in time?"

"If all goes well, nay," he replied, and something in his voice made a shiver kiss her spine. "Pray you need never understand."

She changed the subject uneasily, and for the duration of the ride they spoke of innocuous things while her tension mounted. He described his castle lovingly, first the grounds, then the interior and some of the recent renovations. She spoke of her mindless job but said little else of significance. Gwen had been conditioned not to overdisclose: The more a man knew about her, the less he ended up liking her, and for reasons she couldn't explain to herself, she wanted Drustan MacKeltar to like her. It seemed they were both suddenly eager to fill the silence or it would swallow them alive.

By the time they reached the top of the mountain, Gwen's hands were trembling on the steering wheel, but when he lifted a hand to rake his hair from his face she

saw that his were too. She didn't miss the significance of the fact: He was not playing with her. He genuinely hoped to find his castle at the top of this mountain. Firmly grounded in his delusion, he also feared that it might no longer stand. Sneaking cautious peeks at him, she grudgingly conceded that he was not suffering amnesia or playing some strange game. He believed he was what he claimed he was. The realization was far from reassuring. A physical injury would heal, a mental aberration was much more difficult to cure.

Steeling herself, she backed off the gas, reluctant to complete the journey. She wished she'd hiked it with him, so she wouldn't have to face this moment now. If she'd done it his way, she could have postponed it for another twenty-four hours.

"Turn north."

"But there's no road there."

"I see that," he said grimly. "And considering the ones upon which we've traveled thus far, one would think there should be, a fact that concerns me."

She turned left, and the headlights of the car limned a grassy knoll.

"Up the hill," he urged softly.

Drawing a deep breath, Gwen obeyed. When he snapped at her to stop, she didn't need the command, for she'd monkeyed the clutch and was about to stall anyway. The tips of the towering stones of *Ban Drochaid* loomed over the crest of the hill, black against a misty purple sky.

"Um, I don't see a castle, MacKeltar," she said hesitantly.

"'Tis beyond the fell; the mon conceals it because it sits farther back, past the stones. Come. I will show you." He fumbled with the door latch, then burst from the car.

Fell *and* mon *must mean hill or crest*, she decided as she killed the lights and joined him. The tremor in her hands had spread to the rest of her body, and she was suddenly chilled. "Wait, let me grab my sweatshirt," she said. He waited impatiently, his gaze fixed upon the tops of the stones, and she knew he was desperate to get up over the crest to see if his castle still stood.

No more eager than she was to delay it. "Do you want a bite to eat before we go?" she said brightly, reaching for the salmon patties and celery they'd boxed up at the last stop.

He smiled faintly. "Come, Gwen. Now."

With a resigned shrug, she slammed the car door shut and trudged to his side. When he took her hand in his, she didn't even try to pull away but inched closer, as much for her support as his.

They hiked the remainder of the incline in silence, unbroken but for the chirping of crickets and the melodic hum of tree frogs. At the top she drew in a sharp breath. Against the backdrop of pink-and-purple-streaked sky, a gentle breeze ruffled the grass within the circle of stones. She counted thirteen of them, ranged about a great slab in the center. The megaliths reared up, black against the brilliant horizon.

There was nothing beyond the stones.

Oh, a few pines, and, granted, there were several gentle slopes that might block one's vision, but nothing that a castle could crouch mischievously behind.

They moved forward in silence, cutting through the circle of stones, much more slowly now, for ahead of them, past stumps of what had once been lofty and ancient oaks, was the clear foundation of a castle that no longer stood.

She refused to look at him. She would *not* look at him.

When they reached the perimeter of the outer wall, he sank to his knees.

Gwen eyed the tall grass in the center of the ruin, the chunks of stone and mortar in crumbling piles, the night sky beyond the silent castle grave, anything but him, dreading what she would see. Anguish? Horror? Realization that he truly was mentally unbalanced flickering in those beautiful silver eyes that seemed so misleadingly clear?

"Och, Christ, they're all dead," he whispered. "Who destroyed my people? Why?" He drew a shuddering breath. "Gwen." The word was strangled.

"Drustan," she said softly.

"I bid you return to your wagon for a time."

Gwen hesitated, torn. Half of her wanted nothing more than to tuck tail and run; the other half felt that he needed her desperately here and now. "I'm not leaving now—"

"Go."

He sounded so anguished that Gwen flinched and looked at him. His eyes were dark and unreadable but for a shimmer of moisture.

"Drustan—"

"I beg of you, leave me now," he whispered. "Leave me to mourn my clan alone."

The faintness of his voice deceived her. "I promised not to just abandon—"

"Now!" he thundered. When she still didn't move, his eyes blazed. *"You will obey me."*

Gwen noticed three things in the time it took him to utter the command. First, although she knew it was impossible, his silvery eyes seemed to blaze from deep within like something she'd once seen in a sci-fi movie. Second, his voice was different, sounded like a dozen voices layered upon one another, obliterating any conscious choice, and third, she suspected if he'd ordered her to walk off a cliff in such a voice, she might.

Her legs broke into an instinctive sprint even as her brain was processing those startling observations.

But a few paces inside the stones, the eerie compulsion receded and she stopped and glanced back. He'd entered the ruin and climbed the highest pile of collapsed stone; a black silhouette on his knees, back arched, chest canted skyward, he shook his fist at the indigo sky. When he tossed his head back and roared, the blood curdled in her veins.

Was this the same man who'd kissed her in the fitting room? The one who'd gotten her hotter than a volcano and as prone to imminent explosion and made her think there might be an equation for passion her parents had never taught

her?

No. This was the man who wore fifty weapons on his body. This was the man who carried a double-bladed ax and a sword.

This was the man to whom she'd begun losing a little piece of an organ that she'd been raised to believe was merely an efficient pump. The realization startled her. Madman or no, frightening or not, he made her feel things she'd never felt before.

MacKeltar, she thought, what on earth am I going to do with you?

* * * * *

Drustan wept.

The worst was true. He lay on his back in the Greathall, one knee bent, arms spread wide, his fingers laced in the tall grass, and thought of Silvan.

You have only one purpose, son, as do I. Protect the Keltar line and the knowledge we guard.

He'd failed. In a moment of carelessness he'd been taken unaware, enchanted, stolen from his time, and buried for centuries. His disappearance had triggered the destruction of his castle and clan. Now Silvan was dead, the Keltar line extinguished, and who knew where the tablets and volumes were? The possibility of such knowledge falling into the wrong hands dragged him down into a deep black place beyond fear. He knew that a greedy man could reshape, control, or destroy the entire world with such knowledge.

Protect the line. Protect the lore.

It was imperative that he successfully return to his time.

Although he had not changed so much as one hair, five hundred years had passed, and nothing remained to speak of his existence or the life of his father and his father's father before him. Millennia of training and discipline, all gone in the blink of an eye.

Tomorrow night he would enter the stones and perform the ritual.

Tomorrow night he would not exit the stones. One way or another, he would no

longer be in the here and now.

And God willing, tomorrow her century would matter no more, for with luck, by Mabon-high he would have undone all the wrong that had been done.

Still, for the time he had remaining in the twenty-first century, his people were as dead as his castle was destroyed, naught more than ancient dream dust blowing ignobly across Scotland. Roughly dragging the back of his hand across his cheeks, he pushed himself to his feet and spent the next hour wandering the ruin, looking for graves. He uncovered not one new marker in the chapel yard. Where had his clan gone? If they'd died, where had they been buried? Where was Silvan's marker? Silvan had made it painstakingly dear that he wished to be interred beneath the rowan behind the chapel, yet no stone marker proclaimed his name.

Dageus MacKeltar, beloved brother and son.

He swept shaking fingers over the stone that marked his brother's grave. Unable to comprehend the passage of five centuries, Drustan suffered the fever-hot grief of having buried Dageus only a fortnight past. His brother's death had made him crazed. They'd been close as two people could be. When he'd lost his brother, he'd argued endless hours with his father.

What good is it to have the knowledge of the stones if I cannot go back and undo Dageus's death? he'd shouted at Silvan.

You must never travel to a point within your own life, Silvan had snapped, weary and red-eyed from weeping.

Why can I not return to a time within my own past?

If you are too close in proximity to your past self, one of you—either your past or present self—won't survive. We have no way of foretelling which one lives. There have been times when neither survived. It seems to stress the natural order of things, and nature struggles to correct itself.

Then I'll choose a time in the past when I was across the border in England, Drustan snarled, refusing to accept that Dageus was irrevocably gone.

No one knows how far away is far enough, son. Besides, you are forgetting that

we may never use the stones for personal reasons. They are to be used only for the greater good of the world—or in extreme circumstances to ensure the succession of the MacKeltar. One of us must always live. But these are not extreme circumstances, and you know what would happen if you abused the power.

Aye, he knew. Legend handed down over the centuries claimed a Keltar who used the stones for personal reasons would become a dark Druid the moment he passed through. Lost to honor and compassion, he would relinquish his very soul to the blackest forces of evil. Become a creature of irreverent destruction.

The hell with the legend! he'd thundered defiantly. But even in his grief, he'd known better. Whether or not the legend was true, he would not be the first MacKeltar to trespass on such sacred territory. Nay, he would accept, as all his ancestors had accepted, and honor his oaths. He had not been given unfathomable power to abuse it or use it for personal gain. He couldn't justify using the stones to mend his own heart.

If he saved Dageus and became a dark Druid, what then would he do when Silvan grew ever older? Cheat fate again? A man could go crazy with so much power and no limits. Once he crossed such a line, there would be no turning back; he would indeed become a master of the black arts.

And so he'd bid farewell to Dageus and resworn his oath to his father. *I will never use the stones for personal reasons. Only to serve and protect, and to preserve our line, should it be threatened with extinction.*

As it was now.

Drustan ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. Dageus was dead. Silvan was dead. He was the only remaining Keltar, and his duty was clear. For five hundred years the world had been unprotected by a Keltar-Druid. He had to return and do whatever was necessary to restore a concurrent succession of the Keltar. At any cost.

And what about the price the woman will pay? his conscience chided.

"I have no choice," he muttered darkly. He plunged his hands into his hair and massaged his temples with the heels of his palms.

He knew by rote the formulas for the thirteen stones, but he did not know the critical three, the ones that would specify the year, the month, the day. It was imperative that he return to the sixteenth century shortly after his abduction. Whoever had lured him beyond the castle walls would not be able to penetrate the fortress of Castle Keltar—even with a full army—for at least several days. The castle was too well-fortified to be taken easily. So long as he returned a day, or even two, after his abduction, he should still have time to save his clan, castle, and all the information within its walls. He would defeat his enemy, marry, and have a dozen children. With Dageus dead, he finally understood the urgency Silvan had tried to impart to his sons to rebuild the Keltar line.

Drustan, you must learn to conceal your arts from women and take a wife—any wife. I was blessed with your mother; 'twas a miraculous and uncommon thing. Though I wish the same for you, 'tis too dangerous to have so few Keltar.

Aye, he'd learned that the hard way. He rubbed his eyes and exhaled. He had a minuscule target at which to aim, and he'd never studied the symbols he now needed. He'd been forbidden to travel within his lifetime, so there had been no reason for him to commit to memory the symbols spanning his generation.

Yet... in a dark moment of weakness and longing, he'd looked up the ones that would have taken him back to the morning of Dageus's death—and from those forbidden symbols he could attempt to derive the shapes and lines of the three he needed now.

Still, it would be a guess. An incredibly risky guess, with dire consequences if he didn't get them right.

Which brought him back to the tablets. If Silvan had been able to hide them somewhere on the grounds before he'd suffered whatever fate had befallen him, Drustan wouldn't have to guess—he could calculate the symbols he needed from the information on the tablets, with no fear of error. He felt fairly certain that if he returned himself to the day *after* his abduction, the leagues between his future self and his enchanted body, coupled with the thick stone walls of the cave, would be enough distance between them.

He had no choice but to believe that.

Drustan glanced around the ruins. While he'd brooded, full night had fallen and

it was too dark to conduct a thorough search, which left him tomorrow to hunt for the tablets and try to recall the symbols.

And if the tablets weren't there?

Well, then, that was why there was wee, sweet, unsuspecting Gwen.

* * * * *

Wee, sweet, unsuspecting Gwen perched on the hood of the car, munching celery sticks and salmon patties and absorbing the remaining warmth of the engine. She glanced at her watch. Nearly two hours had passed since she'd left Drustan at the ruin.

She could leave now. Just hop in the car, slam it into reverse, and squeal off to the village below. Leave the madman alone to sort out his own problems.

Then why didn't she?

Pondering Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation, she considered the possibility that since Drustan's mass was so much greater than hers, she was doomed to be attracted to him—so long as he was in her near vicinity—as much a victim of gravity as the earth orbiting the sun.

Lost in thought, she hummed absently as she huddled on the hood, shivering as the indigo sky deepened to black cashmere, arguing with herself and reaching no firm conclusions.

She couldn't shake the feeling that she was overlooking one or more critical facts that might help her figure out what had happened to him. She'd never given any credence to "gut instinct"; she'd believed the gut controlled hunger and waste, nothing gnostic. But in the past thirty-six hours, something in her gut had found a voice, it was arguing with her mind, and she was baffled by the discord.

She had remained in the stones and watched him for some time before she'd sought the warmth of the hood of the car. She'd studied him with the remote candor of a scientist observing a test subject in an experiment, but her study of him had only revealed more contradictions rather than resolving any.

His body was powerfully developed, and a man didn't get a body like that without extraordinary discipline, effort, and a mind capable of sustained focus.

Wherever he had been before she'd found him in the cave, he'd lived an active, balanced life. He'd either worked hard or played hard, and she decided it was more work than play, because his hands were callused, and no stuffy, jock-type aristocrat had calluses on fingers and palms. His silky black hair was too long to be considered apropos on a twenty-first-century lord and gentleman, but it was glossy and well cut. His teeth were even and white, more evidence of care for his body. People who devoted attention to their physical health were usually healthy in mind as well.

He walked with a gait that bespoke confidence, strength, and the ability to make hard decisions. He was reasonably intelligent and well-spoken—his strange inflection and vocabulary aside.

He hadn't known the way out of the cave, and when they had emerged, Gwen hadn't missed the significance of the collapsed tunnel and the overgrowth of foliage.

Och, Christ, they're all dead, he'd whispered.

She shivered. The engine had cooled, the remnants of heat gone.

Occam's Razor promulgated that the simplest explanation that fit the majority of the facts was most likely true. The simplest explanation here was... he was telling the truth. He'd somehow been put into a deep sleep five hundred years ago against his will, perhaps via some lost science, and she'd awakened him by falling on him.

Impossible, her mind exclaimed.

Tired of trying to coax the jury to deliver a consensus, she reluctantly accepted the hung verdict and admitted that she couldn't leave him. What if the impossible was possible? What if tomorrow he offered her some concrete proof that he had been frozen in time for nearly five hundred years? Perhaps he planned to show her how it had been done, some advanced cryogenics mat had been lost over time. She wasn't vacating the premises if there was even a remote possibility of finding out such a thing. *Oh, admit it, Gwen, despite having "dropped out" on the profession that has been eternally crammed down your throat, despite refusing to continue your research, you're still fascinated by science, and you'd love to know how a man could somehow sleep for five centuries and wake up*

healthy and whole. You'd never publish it, but you'd still love to know.

But it was more than just scientific curiosity, and she suspected it had something to do with his sock and her eggs and a desire she couldn't attribute solely to the mandate programmed into her genes that clamored for survival of her race. No other man had ever incited such a response in her.

Science couldn't explain the tenderness she'd felt at the sight of tears in his eyes. Nor the desire she'd had to cradle his head against her chest—not to have her cherry once and truly plucked, but for his comfort.

Oh, her heart was engaged, and it both alarmed and elated her.

Tucking her bangs behind an ear, she slid off the hood and started up the hill. He'd had enough time alone. It was time to talk.

* * * * *

"Drustan." Gwen's voice cut like a light through the darkness around him.

He met her gaze levelly. The poor wee lass looked terrified, yet bristled with resolve.

She looked directly into his eyes then and, if she felt fear, she rose above it. He admired that about her, that despite her misgivings she forged on with the valor of a knight entering battle. When he'd chased her off, he worried that she might simply jump in her metal beast and drive away. The relief he'd felt when he glimpsed her heading toward him through the stones had been intense. Whatever she'd decided to think of him, she'd resolved to stick by his side—he could see it in her eyes.

"Drustan?" Hesitant, yet firm.

"Aye, lass?"

"Are you feeling better now?" she asked warily.

"I have made a tentative peace with my feelings," he said dryly. "Fear not, I doona plan to leap up and avenge the loss of my people." *Yet.*

She gave him a brisk nod. "Good."

He could tell that she didn't wish to discuss it, and rather than accuse him of being deluded when he was clearly distraught, she was going to scuttle around it in some circuitous manner. He narrowed his eyes, wondering what she was up to.

"Drustan, I memorized your poem, now it's your turn to grant me a favor."

"As you wish, Gwen. Only tell me what you want of me."

"A few simple questions."

"I will answer them to the best of my ability," he replied.

"How much dirt is in a hole a foot wide, nine inches long, and three and a half feet deep?"

"That is your question?" he asked, baffled. Of all things she might have asked...

"One of them," she said hastily.

He smiled faintly. Her question was one of his favorite puzzles. His priest, Nevin, had agonized for half an hour trying to calculate exactly how much dirt would be in such a space before seeing the obvious. "There is no dirt in a hole," he replied easily.

"Oh, well, that was a trick puzzle and doesn't tell me much. You may have heard it before. How about this one: A boat lies at anchor with a rope ladder hanging over the side. The rungs in the rope ladder are nine inches apart. The tide rises at a rate of six inches per hour and then falls at the same rate. If one rung of the ladder is just touching the water when the tide begins to rise, how many rungs will be covered after eight hours?"

Drustan ran through a swift series of calculations, then laughed softly, at a time when he thought he might not laugh again. He suddenly understood why she had chosen such questions, and his regard for her increased. When an apprentice petitioned a Druid to be accepted and trained, he was put through a similar series of problems designed to reveal how the lad's mind worked and what he was capable of.

"None, lass, the rope ladder rises with the boat upon the water. Do my powers of

reason convince you that I am not mad?"

She regarded him strangely. "Your reasoning abilities seem untouched by your peculiar... illness. So what is 4,732.25 multiplied by 7,837.50?"

"37,089,009.375."

"My *God*," she said, looking simultaneously awed and revolted. "You poor thing! I asked the first question mostly to see if you were thinking clearly, the second to see if the first had been a fluke. But you did that math in your head in five seconds. Even I can't do it that fast!"

He shrugged. "I have always had an affinity for numbers. Did your questions prove anything to you?" They had proved something to him. Gwen Cassidy was the most intelligent lass he'd ever met. Young, seemingly fertile, an extraordinary mating heat between them, *and* smart.

His certainty that fate had brought her to him for a reason increased tenfold.

Mayhap, he thought, she might not fear him after tomorrow eve. Mayhap there *was* such a love for him as his father had known.

"Well, if you're a candidate for bedlam, you're the smartest madman I've ever met, and your delusions seem confined to one issue." She blew out a breath. "So, what now?"

"Come, lass." He held his arms out to her. She eyed him warily.

"Och, lassie, give me something to hold in my arms that's real and sweet. I will not harm you."

She trudged to his side and sank down in the grass beside him. She kept her face averted for several moments, gazing up at the stars, then her shoulders slumped and she looked at him. "Oh, bother," she said, and stunned him by reaching out to cradle his head in her arms, pulling him to her breast.

His slid his hands around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. "Lovely Gwen, 'tis thanking you once again I am. You are a gift from the angels."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," she muttered against his hair. She seemed awkward holding him, as if she hadn't had much practice. Her body was tense,

and he sensed if he moved suddenly that she would jerk away, so he breathed slowly and kept still, allowing her time to grow accustomed to the intimacy.

"I guess this means you won't be able to prove anything to me tomorrow, huh?"

"As promised, on the morrow I will prove to you my story is true. This changes nothing, or little. Will you stay of your own volition? Mayhap help me explore the grounds tomorrow?"

Hesitantly, she slipped her wee hands into his hair and he half-sighed, half-groaned with pleasure when her nails lightly grazed his scalp. "Aye, Drustan MacKeltar," she said, with as good a lilt as any Scots lass. "I'll be stayin' wi' ye'til the morrow."

He laughed aloud and pulled her closer. He craved her touch, wanted desperately to make love to her, but sensed that if he pressed her now, he would lose the comfort of her embrace. "That was fine, lass. Yer no bampot, and I'm thinkin' we may make a wee douce Highland lass out o' ye yet."

* * * * *

Gwen slept that night curled in the arms of a Highlander, in a field of sillar shakles and gowan, beneath a silvery spoon of a moon, peaceful as a lamb. And if Drustan was feeling wolfish, he bid himself be content merely to hold her.

SEPTEMBER 21
10:23 P.M.

Chapter 9

They searched all day but didn't find the tablets.

When the sky darkened to indigo, pierced by glittering stars, Drustan gave up and constructed a bonfire within the circle of stones so he would have light by which to perform the ritual.

If the worst occurred tonight, he wanted her to know as much about what had happened to him as possible. And her backpack would be an added boon. While digging in the ruins, he'd told her everything that had transpired just prior to his abduction.

One disbelieving brow arched, she'd nevertheless listened as he explained how he'd received a note bearing an urgent summons to come to the clearing behind the little loch *if ye wish tae ken the name of the Campbell who murdered yer brother*. His grief fever-hot, he'd donned his weapons and rushed off, without summoning his guard; the thirst to avenge his brother's death had overridden all intelligent thought.

He told her how he'd grown light-headed and weary while racing toward the loch and that he now believed he'd somehow been drugged. He told her how he'd collapsed just outside the forest on the banks of the loch, how his limbs had locked, his eyes had closed as if weighted by heavy gold coins. He told her he'd felt his armor and weapons being removed, then symbols being painted on his chest, then felt nothing more until she'd wakened him.

Then he told her of his family, of his brilliant and bristly father, of their beloved housekeeper and substitute mother, Nell. He told her of his young priest, whose nagging, fortune-telling mother was wont to chase him ceaselessly about the estate trying to get a look at his palm.

He forgot his sorrow for a time and regaled her with tales of his childhood with Dageus. When he spoke of his family, her skeptical gaze had softened a bit, and she'd listened with marked fascination, laughing over the antics of Drustan and his brother, smiling gently over the ongoing sparring between Silvan and Nell. He deduced from her wistful expression that, even when her family had been alive, there'd not been much laughter and loving in her life.

Have you no brothers and sisters, lass? he'd asked.

She'd shaken her head. *My mother had fertility problems and had me late in life. After she had me, the doctors said she couldn't have any more.*

Why have you not wed and had bairn of your own?

She'd shifted and averted her gaze. *I never found the right man.*

Nay, she'd not had much pleasure in her life, and he'd like the chance to change that. He'd like to make her eyes sparkle with happiness.

He wanted Gwen Cassidy. He wanted to be her "right man." The mere scent of her as she walked by brought every inch of him to attention. He wanted her to become so familiar with his body and the pleasure he could give her with it that a simple glance would make her limp with desire. He wanted to pass a fortnight, uninterrupted, in his bedchamber, exploring her hidden passion, unleashing the eroticism that simmered just beneath her surface.

But it might never come to pass, because once he performed the ritual and she discovered what he was, and what he'd done to her, she would have every reason to despise him.

Still, he had no other choice.

Casting a worried glance at the arc of the moon against the black sky, he inhaled deeply, greedily, of the sweet Highland night air. The time was nearly upon them.

"Let it rest, Gwen," he called. He was moved that she refused to give up. Mad though she might think him, she was still digging about in the ruins. "Come join me in the stones," he beckoned. He wanted to spend what might be his last hour with her, close to the fire, holding her in his arms. His druthers were to strip off her clothes and bury himself inside her, brand himself into her memory with what time he had left, but that seemed as likely as the tablets suddenly manifesting themselves in his hands.

"But we haven't found the tablets." She turned toward him, smudging dirt on her cheek when she pushed back her hair.

"'Tis too late now, lass. The time is nearly upon us, and that tube of light"—he gestured at her flashlight—"won't help us see what isn't there to be found. 'Twas a vain and foolish hope that they might have survived intact on the estate. If we haven't found them yet, the next hour will accomplish naught. Come. Spend it with me." He held out his arms.

She'd slept within them last night, and he'd awakened to the lovely sight of her face, trusting and innocent in repose. He'd kissed her full, lush lips, and when she'd awakened, sleep-flushed, with crease marks on her cheek from being pressed to his wrinkled T-shirt, he'd felt a rush of tenderness he'd not felt for a woman before. Lust, ever at a boil within him when she was near, had simmered into a more intense, complexly layered feeling, and he'd recognized that given time he could fall deeply in love with her. Not merely ache to keep her in bed without respite but develop a real and lasting emotion, equal parts passion, respect, and appreciation, the kind that bound a man and a woman together for life. She was everything he wanted in a woman.

Gwen trudged into the circle, clearly reluctant to give up when there was even one stone unturned, another trait he admired in her.

"Why won't you tell me what you plan to do?" All day she'd tried to coax it out of him, but he'd refused to tell her anything more than that they were looking for seven stone tablets inscribed with symbols.

"I said I'd give you proof, and I will." A stunning, irrevocable amount of proof.

The hours had dragged on as they searched, tossing rocks and rubble, and his hope had steadily faded with each broken chip of pottery, each timeworn memento of his dead clan.

At one point futility had nearly overwhelmed him, and he'd sent her down to the village with a list of items to pick up so he would have time to think, undistracted. During her absence, he'd meditated upon the symbols, working through complex calculations, and derived his best guess at the last three—the guess that would be put to the test in less than one hour. He was aiming for two weeks after his brother's death, plus one day. He was almost certain they were correct and believed there was only a minute chance the worst would happen.

And if the worst happened, he had prepared her well and need only remind her

what to say and do to restore complete, merged memory to the past version of himself. 'Twas why he'd bid her memorize the spell.

She'd picked up several jugs of water, along with flashlights, coffee, and food, and now sat beside him near the fire, cross-legged, cleaning her hands with dampened towels, emitting little sighs of pleasure as she scrubbed at her face with tiny pads from her pack.

While she freshened up, he broke open the stones he'd collected during their hike. Inside each was a core of brilliant dust, which he scraped carefully into a tin and blended with water to form a thick paste.

"Paint rocks," she said, intrigued enough to pause in her ablutions. She'd never seen one but knew the ancients had used them to paint with. They were small and craggy, and deep in the center a dust formed over time that made, brilliant colors when mixed with water.

"Aye,'tis what we call them as well," he said, rising to his feet.

Gwen watched as he moved to one of the megaliths and, after a moment's hesitation, began etching a complex design of formulas and symbols. She narrowed her eyes, studying it. Parts of it seemed somehow familiar yet alien, a perverted mathematical equation that danced just out of her reach, and there was little that did that to her.

A beat of nervous apprehension thudded in her chest, and she watched intently as he moved to the next stone, then the third and the fourth. On each of the stones he etched a different series of numbers and symbols upon their inner faces, pausing occasionally to glance up at the stars.

The autumnal equinox, she reflected, was the time when the sun crossed the planes of the earth's equator, making night and day of approximately equal length all over the earth. Researchers had long argued over the precise use of the standing stones. Was she about to find out their real purpose?

She eyed the megaliths and pondered what she knew about archaeoastronomy. When he finished sketching upon the thirteenth and final stone, her breath caught in her throat. Although she recognized only parts of it, he'd dearly stroked the symbol for infinity:



beneath it. The lemniscate. The Mobius strip. *Apeiron*. What knowledge did he have of it? She scanned the thirteen stones and felt a peculiar itchy sensation in her mind, as if an epiphany was trying to burrow into her overcrowded brain.

Watching him, she was struck by a stunning possibility. Was it possible that he was smarter than *she* was? Was that his madness?

Gorgeous *and* smart? *Be still, my beating heart...*

As he turned away from the last stone, she shivered. Physically, he was irresistible. He was wearing his original costume of plaid and armor again, having shed "such trews that doona let a man hang properly and an inar that canna conceal an oxtter knife" as soon as he'd awakened that morning. Hang properly, indeed, she thought, gaze skipping over his kilt, mouth going dry as she imagined what was hanging beneath it. Was he in that seemingly permanent state of semi-arousal? She'd like to kiss him until there was nothing "semi" about it...

With effort, she dragged her gaze to his face. His sleek hair was a wild fall about his shoulders. He was the most intense, exciting, and erotic man she'd ever met.

When she was around Drustan MacKeltar, inexplicable things happened to her. When she looked at him, his powerful body, his chiseled jaw, the flashing eyes and sensual mouth, she heard Pan's distant pipes and suffered an irresistible compulsion to tithe to Dionysus, the ancient god of wine and orgy. The tune was seductive, urging her to cast aside restraint, don her crimson kitten thong, and dance barefoot for a dark forbidding man who claimed he was a sixteenth-century laird.

He glanced back at her, and their gazes collided. She felt like a time bomb ready to explode, ticking, ticking.

Her face must have betrayed her feelings, because he inhaled sharply. His nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed, and he went quiet, with the perfect stillness of a mountain lion before hurling itself at its prey.

She swallowed. "What are you doing with those stones?" she forced herself to

ask, flustered by the intensity of what she was feeling. "Don't you think it's time you tell me?"

"I have told you all I can." His eyes were cool slate, the crystalline light that usually danced within them subdued.

"You don't trust me. After all I've done to help, you still don't trust me." She didn't try to conceal that it hurt her feelings.

"Och, lass, doona be thinking such. 'Tis merely that some things are... forbidden." Not really, he amended silently, but he simply couldn't risk revealing his plans yet, lest she abandon him.

"Bullshit," she said, impatient with his evasions. "If you trust me, nothing is forbidden."

"I do trust you, wee lass. I am trusting you far more than you know." *With my life, possibly even with my clan's very existence...*

"How am I supposed to believe in you, when you won't confide in me?"

"Ever the doubter, are you not, Gwen?" he chided. "Kiss me, before I sketch the final symbols. For bonny fortune," he urged. Shards of crystal glittered in his eyes, reminding her that although sometimes he banked his passionate nature, it was always simmering just beneath the surface.

Gwen started to speak, but he laid a finger to her lips.

"Please, lass, just kiss me. No more words. There have been enough of them between us." He paused before adding quietly, "If you have aught to say to me, let your heart speak now."

She took a deep breath.

There was no question what her heart was saying. Earlier that afternoon, when she'd gone down to the village, she'd dug her crimson thong out of her pack and, after washing up, had put it on. Then she'd peeled off her nicotine patch, preferring outright withdrawal to having to explain its presence on her body. She was not going to make love for the first time with a patch on. Besides, once she'd made the decision, a remarkable calm had settled over her.

She knew what she was going to do.

Truth be told, she'd probably known the moment he'd opened his eyes that she was going to give him her virginity. The past two days had been nothing more than her way of growing accustomed to the thought, so she would be less apprehensive when she finally did it.

She wasn't simply attracted to him, she was drawn to him on every level—mentally, emotionally, and physically.

She wanted him in a way that had no rhyme or reason. She felt things when he spoke to her and touched her that originated from a unique place inside her. It no longer mattered to her that he might be mentally unbalanced. During the passage of the day, digging beside him in the ruins of the castle while he talked of the various members of his clan, she'd realized that she was going to stick by him until he worked out whatever reality problem he was having. She *liked* him. She wanted to know more about him. She'd begun to respect him, despite his delusions. If she had to check him into a hospital, hold his hand, and sit by his side until he recovered, she was going to do it. If she had to walk around Scotland for months clutching a photograph of him until she found someone who could identify him and shed light upon his condition, she was going to do it.

She tucked her bangs behind her ear and looked at him levelly. Her voice hardly shook when she said, "Make love to me, Drustan."

Mad or not, she wanted him to be her first lover, here and now, on top of a mountain in the Highlands, beneath a million stars, encircled by ancient stones. Perhaps making love had some healing power. God knew, she probably needed some healing too.

His eyes flared and he went perfectly still. "I did hear that, did I not?" he said carefully. "You did say what I think you said? Or have I truly gone as mad as you accuse me of being?"

"Make love to me," she repeated quietly. There was no tremor in her voice the second time.

His silver eyes glittered. "Lass, you honor me." When he opened his arms, she leaped at him, and he swung her effortlessly into his embrace, pulling her legs

around his waist. They both gasped at the intensity of the contact. A current of desire sizzled between them, zapping them both to the core. With powerful strides, he backed her to the perimeter of the stones until her spine rested against one of the megaliths. He lowered his head and kissed her, grinding his hips against her, and when she cried out, he caught it on his tongue.

"I've wanted you since the moment I saw you," he said roughly.

"Me too," she confessed, with a breathless laugh.

"Och, lass, why dinna you tell me?" he asked, kissing her jaw, her cheeks, her nose and lashes, cradling her face with his hands. "Why did you resist? Three *days* we could hae passed doin' this," he said, his burr thickened by desire.

"Not if we wanted to get to your stones," she panted, wondering why he couldn't just shut up and kiss her hard on the mouth. "Shut up and kiss me," she said.

He laughed and kissed her so hard that it unleashed ferocity in her tiny frame. She'd seen movies where people made love slowly, sinuously wrapping around each other, but theirs was a mating of wildness. Given their propensity to argue heatedly, she hadn't expected their sex to be anything less intense. She couldn't get enough of him, she wanted more tongue and more hands and more of his muscular ass. She wanted him naked against her body. Wanted to feel him pounding into her. She'd waited all her life for this, and she was ready. Just *looking* at him made her wet.

He tugged her shirt from her shorts and fumbled with her fly, kissing her urgently all the while. "Your trews, lass, get them off," he said roughly.

"I can't. My legs are wrapped around you," she mumbled. "And *ow*. Your knife is poking my breast."

"Mmm, sorry." He nipped her lower lip and sucked it hard. "I must put you down, lass, to get you naked. And'tis needin' you naked I am."

But he didn't make any move to lower her, hostage to her luscious mouth nibbling at him, her wee hands clawing at his back.

"So put me down, MacKeltar," she panted a few minutes later against his mouth, desperate to feel his skin against hers. "I have too many clothes on!"

"I'm *trying*," he said, trailing kisses down her neck and scraping his velvety tongue back up, only to arrive at her lips again, a position he could hardly fail to take full advantage of.

"Don't put me down," she whimpered when he stopped kissing her. Her lips felt naked and cold without him, her body bereft.

The minute her toes touched the ground, she reached impatiently for his clothing, but he dived for her shorts at the same moment, cursing when he bumped his jaw on her head and she got tangled up in his hair.

She fumbled with his hair, then found her way to the leather bands across his chest but was unable to fathom how he'd fastened them. Brushing her hands aside, he tugged her shirt over her head, then stared at her bra. He touched the lacy fabric with fascination. "Lass, show me your breasts. Be quit of this thing, lest I tear it to shreds in my haste."

She popped the front clasp swiftly and slipped it off. The cool air teased her nipples into puckered crests, and he drew a sharp inhalation of breath. For a moment, he didn't seem to be able to move, just stood and stared.

"You have splendid breasts, lass," he purred, cupping the plump mounds. "Splendid," he repeated stupidly, and she almost laughed. Men loved breasts—any shape or form, they just loved them.

And he was certainly loving hers. He palmed them, lifting and squeezing, and with a husky groan he buried his face in her breasts, rubbing back and forth before drawing a nipple deep into his mouth.

Gwen panted softly when he scattered scorching kisses over her breasts. She twisted and turned in his arms, wanting his mouth there... and there... and there, telling him with her body just how and where she needed him. His fingers worked at her shorts, with little success, and grunting his frustration he tugged at her zipper but succeeded only in jamming it off the track. Encountering similar resistance with his costume, she moaned frantically. She wanted skin against skin; she needed it—every last inch, pressed slick and intimate.

"Oh, just do your own and I'll do mine," she snapped, impeded desire making her downright testy. She needed him naked *now*.

He looked as relieved as she felt by the efficient solution, and as she tugged and twisted at her zipper, then kicked off her shorts, he removed his plaid, tossing knives left and right, doffing his ax and sword and finally shucking his leather armor. He stood up straight, tossing his long dark hair over his shoulders, and looked at her.

"Christ, MacKeltar," Gwen breathed, stunned. Six and a half feet of sculpted naked warrior stood before her, unselfconscious in his nudity. Proud, in fact, and well he should be. He was raw and male and powerful beyond compare, and it had certainly not been a sock or twenty in his jeans. He was breathtaking, and he had a remarkable amount of mass that she had not been factoring into her equation of why she was orbiting him, but she certainly would be in the future. It explained a great deal.

His eyes drifted over her breasts, down her belly, then lit on her kitten thong, and he made a strangled sound. "I thought that was some strange ribbon to restrain your hair. 'Twas why I put it on your pallet that night, thinking you might plait it before you slept. But, ah, lass, I far prefer it there," he said roughly. "'Tis wise you did not tell me that was beneath your trews, for I would have walked around hard all day thinking of removing it with my tongue."

He likes my thong, she thought, beaming. She'd always known that if she'd picked the right man to pluck her cherry, he would appreciate her good taste.

Slipping to his knees before her, he proceeded to do as he'd threatened, lifting the strap of her thong away from the smooth curve of her hip with his teeth and licking the sensitive skin beneath it. He tugged the silk down with little nips, curving his tongue beneath it. She dug her fingers into his shoulders as he licked again and again, building resonance beneath her skin. He sucked her sensitive nub through the silk, making her arch against him, begging for more. Each inch he bared he swept with a hot stroke of his tongue, alternating tiny love bites. His callused hands glided up her thighs, and the delicious friction created by his rough palms against her smooth skin awakened erogenous zones she'd never known she had. Her knees trembled and she clutched his muscled shoulders for support.

"Lovely you are," he purred, slipping his hands between her thighs, kneading and tasting her. "I doona know which part of you to taste first."

"Drustan," she moaned, pressing against him.

"What, Gwen? Do you want me?"

"God, yes!"

"Did you want me when you saw me in those blue trews?" he pushed. "Did you want me then too?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel the heat when I touch you? Does it hit you like a thunderbolt too?"

"Yes."

He stripped off her thong and rose to his feet. He drank in the sight of her nude body for a long moment before dragging her into his arms.

They both cried out as skin met skin, stunned by the intensity of the contact, sizzling where they touched. He kissed her deeply, his tongue hot and hungry, plundering her mouth. She arched her back, rubbing her breasts against him. When he cupped his hands beneath her bottom, she clasped her hands behind his neck and wrapped her legs tightly around him, so his erection was firmly trapped in the vee of her thighs. She squirmed, wanting him inside her *right now*, but either he wasn't cooperating or she was too clumsy to angle them into the right position, which, she rued, given her inexperience, was possible. *But it doesn't seem that he's being particularly helpful*, she thought mulishly, breaking their kiss long enough to look at him. His silvery gaze was wicked... and cockily amused.

"Are you torturing me?"

"My pace, lass. You're the one who said no and wasted days. We might have done this yesterday when you stuffed me into those torturous trews. And later that afternoon. And later that night, and this morning, and—"

When she tried to reply, he kissed her so hard she forgot what she was going to say. He rocked himself against her, mimicking sex, gliding back and forth in the slick vee of her thighs. Millions of tiny nerve endings screamed for more. *Well, if he won't, I will*. She knew better than most people that forces of nature should

not be resisted or subdued. She twisted against him, rubbing herself wantonly, pushing herself to the peak.

As her soft panting became more frantic, Drustan broke the kiss and looked at her. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant and wild, her lips kiss-bruised and parted.

"That's it, lass, take your pleasure." He was riveted by her unabashed hunger for him; she was making him hotter and harder with every insistent thrust of her hips. If he wasn't careful, he'd spill without ever entering her. He doubted a woman had ever desired him so intensely.

She whimpered as she came, she purred, she rubbed against him like a love-starved kitten.

"Yes," he breathed, flooded with purely male, possessive triumph. When her shudders subsided and she relaxed against him, he lowered her to the ground on his plaid, then sat back on his knees and gazed at her for a long moment. Long enough that she began to squirm, and it wrought havoc upon his fleeting control. She arched her back, raising her breasts toward him, her nipples dark berries, begging to be suckled.

"Touch me," she whispered.

"Och, lass, I'll touch you," he promised. He nudged her legs wider, then drank in the sight of her, lying in wait for him, her full breasts swollen from his kisses, her thighs open and slick with her desire.

He ran his hand up the inside of her thighs, across her woman's wetness, then down the other leg. Once, twice, and a half dozen times lingering between her thighs, flicking her sensitive nub, until she was arching her hips up from the plaid.

"I'm going to toop you as you've naught been tooped before, lass."

Gwen was quite certain of that, having never been *tooped* before. "Promises, promises, MacKeltar," she provoked. "A woman could die of old age before you got around to it."

His eyes flew wide in surprise, then he laughed, a husky laugh full of dark

eroticism.

Finally, she purred, when, shoulder muscles bunching sleekly, he covered her body with his.

"Have you no sense at all, that you would provoke me? I'm twice your size, you know," he murmured against her ear.

"So show me something I don't already know." She gasped, when he nipped her earlobe.

"Like this?" he asked, shifting himself between her thighs. "Or like this?" He rubbed the head of his cock back and forth and back again in her slick folds.

Gwen melted as he spoke to her then in a language she'd never heard but knew was tribute from the husky admiration in his voice. The strange accents made her wild as he purred compliments against her heated skin. She half-wondered if he was ensorcelling her, because the more he spoke in his foreign accents, the hotter she got. Or perhaps it was the smoky deep voice and the way his hands moved over every inch of her body as if memorizing the subtleties of each plane and hollow. He devoted lavish attention to her breasts, squeezing them, plumping and fondling them until she was nearly delirious with need, hovering at the brink of another orgasm.

He braced himself on his forearms and suckled each nipple, moving his head back and forth, chafing her with his shadow beard, and just when she thought one couldn't take the erotic teasing anymore, he would turn his attention to the other. He kissed her breasts, the sides of her breasts, the soft warm place beneath them, pushed them together and kissed the plump cleavage, dragging his tongue roughly between them, then returned to her hard nipples and took them alternately with his teeth. Nipping and suckling and drawing her into his mouth. She nearly screamed from the exquisite pleasure of it.

He trailed kisses over her ribs, down her abdomen, then glided his tongue across her belly, playfully flickering into her belly button. Then, suddenly, he dragged his tongue across her swollen bud and she cried out.

"There's my lass," he purred, burying his face between her thighs.

The man has a magic tongue, she thought, writhing beneath him. He cupped his

hands beneath her bottom, raised her to his mouth, and Gwen filled the night with tiny whimpers as he kissed and licked her, then plunged his tongue deep inside her. As his hot tongue stroked her in places that had never been touched before, she came in spasms, and he lapped her as she shuddered over and over again. Then, just when she thought it was over, he gently nipped her, wringing a tinier series of spasms from her trembling body.

Resonance—I am crystal and I am shattering, she thought feverishly.

As she arched her hips against him, crying out, Drustan growled and pressed himself against the ground. He wanted this to last as long as it could. Wanted to pleasure her like no other man ever had. Gritting his teeth, he pressed himself against the plaid, remaining perfectly still, trying to convince his cock that it needed to wait just a bit longer, because at least he could give her this.

At least he could have this. This perfect moment with her, if naught else. She whimpered softly as the spasms stopped, and he gently lapped her again, playfully warning her that she would have many more peaks of pleasure before he was through with her.

She was so beautiful and open to him. She was the most sensuous woman he'd ever met in his life, every inch of her body sensitive to his caresses, and although he'd bedded scores of bawdy women in his life, none had nudged him past the edge of reason, until now. His stomach was shaky from the intensity of his desire, and his cock was so hard it was painful. His breathing sounded harsh to his own ears, the beat of his heart was the thunder of a hundred horses, the blood boiled in his veins and reality narrowed down to: Just. One. Thing.

Her.

He could wait no longer.

He rained kisses up the gentle swell of her stomach, over her breasts, and dragged the edge of his teeth back and forth across her nipples. Positioning himself between her legs, he did not take her immediately but kissed her thoroughly, a kiss of demand and dominion, of raw possession.

"Tell me," he demanded. She didn't play shy or coy, a thing he liked. She let him read her hunger in her face, in her expressive stormy eyes, hiding nothing. But

would she speak of her desire? Would she be audacious and whisper words to him that would tell him how to fulfill her wildest needs?

"Tell me," he insisted.

His wee Gwendolyn said a thing to him then that he'd never heard a woman say before, neither high-born nor whore, and the baseness of her words slammed into him as if he'd swallowed a double dose of a Rom lust potion.

He'd *never* had a woman say *that* to him. They used gender words, but what Gwen had asked of him was exactly what he wanted to do. Their attraction to each other was primitive and went far beyond reason.

If she could voice such raw desires, what more might she confront bravely? Who and what he was? Might she possess such courage?

She lay beneath him, shivering with desire, her lips glistening in the moonlight, wet from his kisses, and he realized he was falling for her harder than a mighty oak cleaved in two by a lightning bolt would crash to the forest floor.

He plunged inside her.

And stopped.

Not by choice—oh, nay, not by his choice—but because there was something in his way.

"Oh, just *push*," she cried. "I know it's going to hurt at first. Just do it! Get it over with."

He was stunned. Fragments of thoughts collided in his head: *She is untouched by any man; how could this woman have survived a maiden so long? Are the men in her century utter fools? Then, Ah, she chose no other, but she chose me!*

What a gift!

A more noble man might have backed off, a more noble man who knew that even a minute possibility existed that he might disappear that night would surely have refused, but there was something about Gwen Cassidy that drove him far past nobility. He wanted her, by fair means or foul. And if the worst happened tonight, the loving between them might make her more able to face what she

may have to confront. Mayhap help her complete all the things he might need her do, and mayhap—he could entertain the outlandish dream—she could be persuaded to find a happy future in his past. For like it or not, the only future she was going to have after tonight was in his past.

He would make it up to her, he vowed. Her happiness would be his first priority. He would give her anything she wanted, heap her with mountains of gifts, attention, and devotion, as befitted a queen. He would wait on her hand and foot. And mayhap loving could work out the uncertainties in his plan that no amount of careful and cautious orchestration could accomplish.

"I may be little," she coaxed softly when he hesitated, "but I'm tougher than you think." And she repeated her previous request that had sent all the blood in his body rushing to his groin.

Inflamed, he plunged through the barrier, claiming her.

"Yes," she screamed, and he drank her cry into his mouth, kissing her savagely, pushing deep within her. She matched his urgent rhythm, and although he knew it had caused her pain, her desire quickly surpassed the tearing of her maidenhead.

He gave himself to her with intensity he'd not given a woman before, burying himself so deep inside her he thought he must be touching the lip of her womb, then gliding out, slowly, only to thrust again. His entire world, his every breath and heartbeat, was focused on the woman in his arms.

Slipping her legs over his shoulders, he angled himself to drive back into her. He took the move achingly slowly, knowing how wee she was and that he would stretch her to her limits, but he needed to be so deep inside her that he no longer knew where he began and she ended. He slid into her, inch by inch, his body straining from such sweet torture.

"Drustan," she cried, tossing her head from side to side, tangling her silky hair. He suckled her nipples as he withdrew and returned, and when he felt her contract around him, he clamped his teeth lightly on a nipple and tugged. He drove himself into her hard and fast and deep, over and over until he was nearly mindless with savage need.

"Och, lassie," he said roughly, caught up in her spasms, "I canna ride out this storm again." And as he thrust inside her so hard it nearly hurt him, his husky voice mingled with her sweet cries. They peaked in perfect rhythm, each shuddering contraction of her body drawing forth his seed.

He purred to her as he came, in an ancient tongue he knew she wouldn't understand. He said foolish things, heartfelt things, deep and weighty things he could never acknowledge otherwise. He called her his goddess of the moon and praised her courageous spirit and fire. He asked her for babies. Christ, he talked like a fool.

Gwen shuddered against him, listening to his strange accents, and somehow she knew that every word he uttered was praise. When he finally stilled against her, she stroked his back and shoulders, marveling, buoyant, elated and sated beyond compare.

"You are beautiful, lass," he whispered, brushing his lips back and forth over hers tenderly.

She squealed when he thumped inside her, a final flexing from their love play.

"Did I hurt you, sweet Gwen?" he asked, with such concern in his eyes that it touched her heart.

"A bit," she confessed. "But no more than I expected after seeing that... *sock* you have there."

He smiled, his eyes dancing. "I told you it was God-given. You would hear none of it." He sucked her lower lip. "I didn't mean to hurt you, lass. I fear I was without sense for a time there."

"No more than I. I think I said something really bad," she worried, nibbling her lip.

"It aroused me immensely," he growled. "Never have I had a woman say such a thing to me, and it made me hard as stone."

"You are *always* hard, MacKeltar," she teased. "Don't think I don't see that permanent bulge in your clothing."

"I know," he said smugly. "Your glance drifts there often." He sobered suddenly. "But now I know why you were naysaying me. Gwen, why did you not tell me you had known no man before me?"

She closed her eyes and sighed. "I was afraid you would say no," she finally admitted. "I wasn't sure you would make love to a virgin."

Make love, she'd said. She'd saved herself from all others but chosen to give herself to him. *You care for me*, he thought, hoping she would say the words. He was disappointed when she didn't, but in her touch—her hands tracing gentle circles on his chest—he felt a tenderness that meant much to him.

And she'd given him her maidenhead.

He felt himself hardening again, moved by the depth of her gift. Although he hadn't given her proof that he was telling the truth, she'd given of herself freely to him, that which she'd given to no other man. She had feelings for him, he was sure of it, as sure as he was that Gwen Cassidy didn't give of herself lightly.

She'd honored him in so many ways.

There was no question in his mind: She was the one for him. The woman he'd wanted all his life—and so what if he'd had to come five hundred years into the future to find her? He would give her the words and begin the Druid binding, and mayhap in a few hours, if all was well, she might freely give the words back to him.

And if all doesn't go well?

He shrugged mentally. If all didn't go well, and he didn't survive tonight, the sixteenth-century version of him would find her druggingly irresistible, even before she said the spell to merge their memories. He could see no harm in that, doubted it would come to pass anyway.

She'd given him a precious gift; this was all he had to offer her in return. The gift of his eternal love.

He placed the palm of his right hand on her chest over her heart, the palm of his left above his, and looked deep into her eyes. When he spoke, his voice was low and firm: "If aught must be lost, 'twill be my honor for yours. If one must be

forsaken,'twill be my soul for yours. Should death come anon,'twill be my life for yours." He drew a deep breath and finished it, completing the spell that would haunt him for life. "I am Given." He shuddered as he felt the irrevocable bond take root within him—a bond that could never be severed. He was now connected to her by gossamer strands of awareness. Were he to walk into a room of people, he would be drawn to her side. Were he to enter a village, he would know if she was in it. Emotion welled up within him, and he struggled to hold it back, astonished by the intensity. Feelings crashed over him, feelings he'd never imagined.

She was so beautiful—made a thousand times more so by his having opened himself completely to her.

Her eyes were wide. "What did you mean by that?" she asked, with a shaky little laugh. He'd spoken in that strange voice again, the one that held the resonance of a dozen voices, the soft rumble of spring thunder. It had sounded terribly romantic—a little serious and scary too. His words had been almost like a living thing, brushing her with warm fingers. She had a nagging sensation that there was something she should say back to him but had no idea what or why.

He smiled enigmatically.

"Oh, I get it. It's another one of those things—"

"That will become clear in time," he finished for her. "Aye. It's rather like, I will protect you should the need ever arise." *It's more like, you are mine forever, should you agree and give me the words back. And now I am yours forever, whether you agree or not.* It was a risky thing he'd just done, of a certain, because if she never agreed, Drustan MacKeltar would ache endlessly for her. His heart trapped by the binding spell, he would sense her eternally, would love her eternally. But should she one day choose to freely give the words back, the bond would intensify a thousandfold. He could live for such a hope.

Her eyes widened further when she felt him stiffen inside her. "Again?"

"Are you too tender?" he asked gently.

She arched a brow. "I told you, I'm tougher than you think," she said, running the tip of her pink tongue over her lower lip.

He groaned and caught it between his lips. "Then, aye, lass, and again and again," he said, as he began to glide back and forth inside her. "We MacKeltars were bred for stamina."

And since he knew she was the disbelieving type, a woman disinclined to accept anything but firm proof, he proceeded to give her hard evidence of his claim, telling her with his body all the words he so longed to say.

SEPTEMBER 21

Three Minutes to Midnight

Chapter 10

Gwen stretched languorously, her hands skimming the muscles of Drustan's back. She felt sleepily sated and sexy and tender and, oh... so much more complex than she had before. She felt brand new somehow.

Gwen Cassidy had finally been well and truly plucked.

An indefinable sense of peace and rightness nestled in her belly, her heart was full, her mind at ease.

But breathing beneath his weight was a challenge even the new and improved Gwen wasn't up to, so with a gentle nudge she eased him off her. He rolled onto his back and she slipped astride him, straddling him the same way she had the day she'd found him but with one highly erotic and delightful difference: They were both nude. There was so much she wanted to do with him. She wanted to make love on top of him, beside him, with him behind her. .

"Drustan," she murmured, studying his face, so beautiful in the silvery light of the moon. His eyes opened, hot-metal silver, lazily seductive. "Thank you," she said softly. He'd made her first time a beautiful, passionate, intense experience, and if for some unfathomable reason she never got to make love with him again, she knew he would be the standard by which she judged men for the rest of her life.

She was falling head over heels in love. And it felt incredible.

He caught her face in his hands and pulled her down for a hungry kiss. "Never thank me, lass. Only ask me for more. That's the finest praise a man can hear from a woman. That and this"—he slipped a hand between her legs—"woman's dew that tells a man how much she desires him."

He smiled at her, and at precisely the same moment noticed the carriage of the moon in the sky. His smile faded abruptly and his body tensed beneath hers. The passion receded from his eyes, replaced by panic.

"Christ," he swore, "'tis nearly too late!" Rolling her off him, he leaped to his feet, grabbed his plaid, and raced to the stone slab. "Come," he commanded.

Befuddled by her rapid dismount, still feeling sexy and sleepy and soft, she stared blankly at him.

"Tis nearly midnight," he said urgently. "Come."

She reached for her clothing, and he snapped, "No time to dress. But you must bring your pack, Gwen."

Puzzled by his comment, and not completely comfortable with her nudity, she grabbed her backpack and hurried to join him at the slab nevertheless, the scientist within her intensely curious to discover how he planned to prove his claims true. Besides, she told herself, there would be time for more lovemaking afterward.

He worked swiftly, stealing intermittent glances at the sky as he dipped his fingers in the paint and sketched the final symbols on the slab.

"Take my hand."

She slipped her hand into his. He studied the designs a moment, then shook his head and exhaled loudly.

"Pray Amergin, let them be right. Stand close to me, Gwen. Here."

Gwen positioned herself where he indicated and tried to peer around him to see the last symbols, but he angled his body between them, blocking her view.

"What do you think is going to happen, Drustan?" she asked, glancing at her watch, surprised that anything had remained on her body in the frenzy of their love-making. She nearly laughed when she realized that it, and the strap of the pack over her shoulder, were all she now wore. The second hand moved with an audible *tick-tick-tick*.

"Gwen, I—" He broke off, and looked at her.

Her gaze flew to his. Had he felt it too when they'd made love? Being inexperienced in lovemaking, she was uncertain if the emotion she felt when she looked at him was a temporary side effect of physical intimacy. She suspected it was of more significant duration but wasn't in any hurry to make a fool of herself. But if he was feeling it too, she might believe that what existed between

them was every bit as real and valid as any mathematical equation. His gaze swept over her body, in such a way that he made her feel beautiful, not short and... *all right, a little plump*. She'd always felt inadequate in a world that plastered leggy, slim cover models on every magazine and in every movie.

But not with him. In his eyes, she saw a reflection of herself that was perfection.

"Would that we had an eternity," he said sadly.

Her fingers tightened around his hand, silently encouraging him to continue. When her watch chimed the hour of midnight with tiny metallic tings, she flinched. *One. Two. Three...*

"You are magnificent, lass," he said, tracing his finger down the curve of her cheek. "Such a fearless heart."

Five. Six. Seven.

"Have you come to care for me, if only a bit, Gwen?"

Gwen nodded, her throat suddenly thick, not trusting herself to speak. He looked so sad that she was afraid she might blurt out silly sentimental things and make a fool of herself. She'd already said one thing during their lovemaking she'd never thought would slip past her lips, and now if she wasn't careful she'd get disgustingly mushy on him.

Nine.

"That, and my faith in you, must be enough. Would you aid me, were I in danger?"

"Of course," she said instantly. Then, more hesitantly, "What about me?"

"My life for you," he said simply. "Lass, doona fear me. No matter what happens, promise me you will not fear me. I am a good man, I vow I am."

Stricken by the pain in his voice, she brushed his jaw with her fingers. "I *know* you are, Drustan MacKeltar," she said firmly. "I don't fear you—"

"But things might change."

"Nothing can change that. *Nothing* could make me fear you."

"Would that it could be true," he said, his eyes dark.

Twelve.

Thirteen?

He cried out then, dragged her roughly into his arms, and kissed her, a deep soul kiss—and the world as Gwen Cassidy knew it began to unravel at the seams.

She began gyrating in his arms, bobbing and spinning like a cork in a whirlpool, up and down, side to side, back and forward... then a new direction that wasn't a direction at all.

Space-time shifted, her very existence within it changed, and somehow she melted from Drustan's arms.

Her backpack slipped from her shoulder and went sailing off into a vortex of light.

As if from a great distance, she saw her hands reaching for it, but there was something wrong with them. They had an added dimension her mind couldn't comprehend. She wiggled her fingers, struggling to grasp their new quality. Her palms, her wrists, her arms were so... different.

She thought she saw Drustan spinning past and then she thought she heard a distant sonic boom, but a sonic boom would have meant that she was moving faster than the speed of sound, and she wasn't moving at all, unless one counted the fact that she felt as ineffectual as a butterfly batting fragile wings against the gale-force winds of a tornado. She fancied she could feel the tips of those delicate appendages tearing off. Besides, she thought dimly, struggling for some core of sanity, the person moving faster than the speed of sound didn't hear the sonic boom. Only those standing still did.

Then a flash of white encompassed her, so blinding that she lost all sense of time and space and self. Whiteness filled her: She choked on it, breathed it, felt it beneath her skin, soaking into her cells and rearranging them according to some alien design. *Terminal velocity for the average skydiver*, the scientist within her recited in a chilly voice, *averages ninety-three to one hundred twenty-five miles*

per hour. Sound travels seven hundred sixty miles per hour, on a humid day. Escape velocity is the speed required to exit the earth's atmosphere and achieve interplanetary travel, or twenty-five thousand miles per hour. Light travels one hundred eighty-six thousand miles per second. Then the peculiar thought: A cat always lands on its feet. Maintain an angular momentum of zero.

There was no sense of motion, yet there was a horrible vertigo. There was no sound, yet the silence was deafening. There was no fullness of body, yet there was no emptiness. Escape velocity achieved and exceeded, white and whiter, she was—in? on? off?—a long bridge or tunnel. She had no body to instruct to run.

The white was gone so abruptly that the darkness hit her like a brick wall. Then there was blessed sight and sound, and feeling in her hands and feet.

Maybe not so blessed, she decided. Taste was a bitter metallic bile in the back of her throat; weight was a sickening pressure after the terrible vacuum.

Stifling the urge to vomit, she lifted a head that weighed two tons and felt as swollen as an overripe tomato.

Around her, the night exploded. Driving hail pelted the ground, gouging tendrils of mist from the soil. The wind wailed and keened, flung leaves and snapped branches. Large chunks of ice stung her bare skin.

"Drustan!" she cried.

"Here, lass." He stumbled to her side, then slipped on the hail-covered terrain and fell to his knees.

"Drustan, what's happening?" As he drew himself erect, she saw that his face was pale and drawn; lines she'd never noticed before etched sharp grooves around his mouth. He was looking down at his hands with horror. Her gaze flew to them, wondering what was wrong with them. Whatever he saw, she couldn't see. They seemed to disappear into the mist.

"I erred when I sketched the final symbols," he yelled hoarsely. A large ball of ice struck his cheekbone, raising an immediate welt. "I went back too far. I thought I could come with you, but I cannot. Forgive me, lass, it wasn't supposed to be this way!"

"What?" Gwen could scarcely hear him, so deafening was the wind. Strands of her hair stung the skin of her neck as the wind whipped it wildly about her face. The gale was so lashing, it felt it was raking the skin from her cheekbones. The hail was bruising her scalp; her head ached in dozens of spots. She inched toward him and clutched at his arm. It felt curiously insubstantial beneath her fingers, although she could see the muscles in his arms bulging. He tried to close his misty hand around hers, but it sort of slid through hers.

"What's *happening* to you?" she wailed.

"Save me. Save my clan, lass," he yelled. "Keep the lore safe." *Christ, he could feel himself being torn in two. Talking to her, simultaneously trying to reason with his past self. It wasn't working. It took immense effort merely to move his lips and form words. He was coming apart... two places in one time, and all the while reeling because he finally understood the next dimension... and he had to tell her what to say and do! He must tell her how to use the spell he'd taught her!*

"*What* are you talking about?" she cried. "Ouch!" she cried, as a chunk of hail struck her forehead.

But he didn't answer, just flickered in a way that terrified her, as if he was fading but fighting to stay. Nearly hysterical, Gwen tried to cling to him, but he slid through her hands.

His silver eyes flashed, he looked wild, forbidding, a dark sorcerer from eons past. He thrust his plaid at her, wordlessly demanding she take it.

She closed trembling fingers over the fabric.

"Listen," he cried. His gaze swept over her and passion blazed in his eyes. Then he cocked his head as if hearing something she couldn't hear and glanced beyond her as if seeing something she couldn't see. His lips moved one last time.

The moment you see him you must tell him... show him—

"What?" she cried. "Tell who what?" Flying leaves and limbs rained down upon them. When he ducked and shielded his face to avert a blow from a particularly large branch, she missed most of what he was saying. Tell and show who *what*?

Abruptly, he was gone. Vanished as completely as the symbols had vanished

from his chest in the cave days ago.

With his disappearance, the maelstrom died and the hail ceased abruptly. The night fell silent, the mist dissipated on a last, bitter gust of wind.

Gwen remained frozen, in shock, bruised and wind-burned and aching.

She didn't trust herself to take even one step on a leg that moments ago had not been her leg at all but her leg *and* something else, something the bristling scientist was still pacing back and forth in a white lab coat protesting stridently. She wasn't certain any part of her would obey simple orders, so knotted up was her mind.

"Drustan," she called weakly. Then louder: "*Drustan!*"

A terrible silence greeted her. She shivered uncontrollably, belatedly remembering she was nude. Woodenly, she pulled his plaid around her and scrambled across the slippery ground toward the fire.

But there was no fire. The storm must have put it out.

She dropped to her knees on the hail-covered ground, clutching his plaid, huddling within it for warmth. Dazedly, she glanced about and was astonished to see the hail was so thick on the ground that it looked as if the heavens had opened up and simply iced the top of the mountain. It could take hours for it to melt in the warm autumn night. And then she fell still and thought no more about the strange storm, as she replayed their entire encounter through her mind, finally seeing the pattern.

He had said he would *prove* to her that he was telling the truth, but he could only do it at the stones. He'd said that if she didn't believe him, she would be free of him. She now realized he'd always chosen his words cautiously, couching double meanings.

Now she understood exactly what he'd meant. "You *left* me," she whispered. "You really showed me, huh?" She snorted and started crying at the same time. "Incontrovertible proof. Uh-huh. Ever the doubter here, that's me."

He'd bullied her into guiding him through her time to the stones, made incredible love to her, proved his story true, then returned himself to his own time—leaving

her in the twenty-first century, alone.

He hadn't been deranged after all. She'd had a genuine time-traveling sixteenth-century warrior in her arms, and she mocked him at every turn. Treated him with disbelief, even patronized him on occasion.

Oh, she'd screwed this one up royally. She'd fallen for him at terminal velocity. In the space of three days, she'd grown attached to him as she'd never thought possible. She'd been building a life with him in her mind, rationalizing away his delusions, weaving him into her world.

And he'd *left* her. He'd not even offered to take her with him!

Would you have gone? Would you have said yes? the scientist asked dryly.
Plunged into a century you knew nothing about? Left this one behind for good?

Hell, yes, I would have said yes! What do I have here? I was falling in love, and I'd go anywhere, do anything for that!

For a novel change, the scientist within her had no caustic comeback.

Gwen cried, feeling suddenly old, regretting the loss of a thing she'd not truly appreciated and understood while she'd held it in her hand.

She had no idea how long she lay in the clearing, replaying things through her mind, lingering over their lovemaking, seeing everything in a different light.

When she finally sat up, she was trembling. Her knees were frozen from huddling on the ice, and her toes were stinging. *I feel, MacKeltar. You taught me that. I hope you're happy with yourself—showing me I had a heart by hurting me.*

She pushed herself up and slipped around the circle, searching for her clothes in the dark. Shaking off a fresh desire to weep, she blew out a breath. Where the hell were her boots? For that matter, where were her backpack and her flashlight? She was starting to suffer a severe nicotine craving; emotional distress always made her crave a cigarette.

How was she ever going to get over him? How would she cope with the knowledge that the man she'd lost her heart to had been dead for hundreds of

years?

Panic gripped her as she circled the stone slab, searching for her belongings. They were gone. Could the freakish and violent windstorm have carried it all off?

Stunned, she glanced about, then up at the sky, and caught a glimpse—for the first time since Drustan had disappeared—of what lay beyond the stones.

Where previously there had been nothing, tons upon tons of stone rose up from the earth.

She gaped in astonishment, her gaze drifting from tower to turret, to bigger stone tower, past walls capped by those toothy stone things one saw on castles everywhere in Scotland, and to yet another turret and a square tower again. Blinking, she looked left to right and back again.

An alarm went off in her brain, but she couldn't respond to it. She couldn't respond to anything. She started hyperventilating; tiny breaths slammed into each other and piled up in her throat.

A monstrous castle lay beyond the circle of stones.

Huge, forbidding, yet beautiful, it was fashioned of massive gray stone walls that vaulted smoothly skyward. A center rectangular tower stood tallest and had two smaller round towers flanking it. Wings spread east to west consuming the horizon, with large square towers at the farthest east and west ends. A milky fog dusted the ridges and capped the turrets.

Her jaw dropped.

Still as the cold stones that encircled her, she stared.

Could it be that she had not lost him after all?

With a painful surge of adrenaline that made her heart beat much too fast, she bolted from the circle of stones and burst into a terraced courtyard. Pathways forked in various directions, one leading straight to the front steps of the castle itself.

She spun in a slow circle, heedless of her icy toes. Dimly, her mind registered

the fact that the hail had fallen only within the circle of stones. The ground beyond it was warm and dry.

He'd told her that in his century, the stones of *Ban Drochaid* had been enclosed within the perimeter walls of his estate, but the *Ban Drochaid* she'd entered an hour ago had resided in the midst of a wasteland of crumbled stone and grass.

Yet now she was completely encircled by high walls, within a veritable fortress.

She glanced at the night sky. It was dense black with no distant glow on the horizon in any direction, which was impossible, because Alborath lay in the valley beyond, and only last night, while sitting on the hood of the rental car, she'd rued that the lights of the village spoiled her view of the stars.

Turning back to the castle that hadn't been there five minutes ago, she fingered the folds of his plaid. Suddenly, the words he'd shouted—words she'd ignored because they hadn't made any sense at the time—now made perfect sense.

I went back too far. I thought I could come with you, but I cannot.

Save my clan.

Oh, God; Drustan, she thought, you didn't go back in time. You sent me back to save you!

*"When I consider the small span of my life
absorbed in the eternity of all time, or the
small part of space which I can touch or see
engulfed by the infinite immensity of spaces
that I know not and that know me not, I am
frightened and astonished to see myself here
instead of there... now instead of then."*

—BLAISE PASCAL

*"For those of us who believe in physics, this
separation between past, present, and
future is only an illusion, however
tenacious,"*
—ALBERT EINSTEIN

*JULY 18
1518*

Chapter 11

The nightmare was beyond anything Drustan

MacKeltar's slumbering mind had ever managed to conjure, replete with a taste so vile, he knew it for what it was: the taste of death.

Shadowy images taunted him at the periphery of his vision, and he felt a monstrous leech suckle onto him, and they grappled, then suddenly there were two discrete yet similar beings inside his body.

I am possessed of a demon, the sleeping Drustan thought, struggling to spew the atrocity forth. *I will not permit this*. Enraged, he resisted the new presence violently, lashing out to destroy it without even trying to identify it. It was foreign and as strong as he was, and that was all he needed to know.

He focused his mind, isolating the intruder, cocooning it with his will, and with immense effort thrust it from his body.

Then suddenly there were two of him in his nightmare, but the other him looked older, and anguished. Mortally weary.

Get thee hence, devil, Drustan shouted.

Listen to me, you fool.

Drustan clamped his hands over his ears. *I will hear none of your lies, demon*. Somewhere in the distance—in the nightmare place that defied his mind's ability to either comprehend or fabricate—Drustan scented a woman. She was indistinct, but he could feel her, even smell the fragrant heat of her skin. A rush of longing consumed him, nearly shattering his resolve to hold the other him at bay.

Sensing the weakness, the replica leaped forward, but Drustan flexed his will and knocked him aside.

They glared at each other, and Drustan wondered at the play of emotions on the replica's face. Fear. Sorrow so deep it might cleave a man asunder. And as he watched, a sudden understanding flickered in the false Drustan's eyes, even as

the replica seemed to be losing solidity.

You would fight me to the death, the counterfeit's lips moved soundlessly. I see. I see now why only one lives. 'Tis not Nature, which is innately indifferent, but our own fear that causes us to destroy each other. I beg you, accept me. Let us both be.

I will never accept you, Drustan roared.

The replica faded, then grew more solid, then faded around the edges again. *You are in terrible danger—*

Speak no more! I will believe naught you say! Drustan lashed out at the shadow-him viciously.

The shadow-him glanced over his shoulder and shouted to someone Drustan couldn't see: *The moment you see him you must tell him the first rhyme I taught you, remember it? The verse in the car, and show him the backpack and all will be well.*

Be gone, demon! Drustan roared, shoving at him with his will.

The other him speared Drustan with his gaze. *Love her,* the counterfeit whispered, and then he vanished.

* * * * *

Drustan shot bolt upright in bed, gasping for air.

He clawed at his throat, pounded his fists on his chest, and finally managed to suck in a painful breath. He was sweating. Icy and feverish at the same time, he'd shredded his linens in his sleep. Previously soft animal skins were now mere tufts of sweat-slicked fur, and his head pounded.

He fumbled for the mug of wine at his bedside. It took him several attempts before he succeeded in wrapping his fingers securely around it. Trembling, he drank deep, until the mug was empty. He dragged the back of his hand across his mouth.

His heart thundered and he felt as if he'd just been more bitterly threatened than ever in his life. As if something had crept into his body and tried to claim

territorial rights.

He plunged shaking hands into his hair, lunged from the bed, and began to pace. He glanced back at the bed warily, expecting a succubus to be lurking in the pile of destroyed linens.

By Amergin! What strange dream had been visited upon him? He could recall naught of it now but a bitter sense of violation, and a hollow sense of victory.

His attention was snared by a brilliant flash of light beyond the window of his bedchamber. A low growl of thunder followed it, and he tugged aside the tapestry and gazed out through the glass into the night.

Drustan stood by the window for a long time, taking slow, deep breaths and trying to regain a measure of calm. He rarely suffered nightmares and preferred to forget this one, for the dream reeked of madness. He firmly corralled it in a deep, dark place in his mind, burying it where it would never see the light of day.

The storm died as suddenly as it had arisen, and the Highland night fell still and silent again.

* * * * *

Think think think, Gwen berated herself. *You're supposed to be so brainy, use it.* But her brain felt numb and clumsy. After the day she'd just had—the incredible passion, the bizarre storm, the fuzziness of her mind from nicotine withdrawal—she was in no condition to be brilliant. She was hardly in any condition to manage average.

Pacing gingerly upon the melting hail, she tallied the tangible facts, because the intangible ones, at the moment, scared the bejeezus out of her. She was desperate to find some factual, logical conclusion to explain away the illogic of her whereabouts.

She shivered, eyeing the castle. The prospect of confronting what it held both fascinated and terrified her.

But there was something she had to do first. Not that she was the disbelieving type, no way, not her. But she did prefer to view hard evidence with her own two eyes.

Drawing a bracing breath, she plunged into the darkness beyond the circle and sped away from the castle. When she reached the estate wall, she flung herself up on a pile of casks, pressed her cheek to a narrow slit in the wall, and peered out into the valley at the city of Alborath.

It wasn't there. Suspicion confirmed.

Her shoulders slumped. She hadn't expected it to be, but its absence was shocking nonetheless.

I went back too far.

In other words, she mused, sorting through what she knew about the theories of time travel, he'd probably tried to go back to shortly after he'd been abducted, but had gotten the symbols wrong. He'd returned to a time when the past him was there in the castle, and common theory held that if time travel were possible, the fabric of the universe would not suffer two identical selves in a single moment. The future him had somehow been canceled out.

Time travel! the scientist shouted in her head. *Analyze!*

We have to save him. Analyze that. We'll contemplate the ramifications of multiverses later.

If the future him had been canceled out, that meant the Drustan she'd fallen in love with no longer existed, but she would find him in the castle, pre-enchantment, and with no knowledge of her whatsoever.

That thought made her heart hurt. She was in no rush to look into his silvery eyes, which had gazed at her so intimately but an hour ago, and see an utter lack of recognition.

Promise me you will not fear me.

Fear him? Why would she have feared him? Because he could manipulate time? Sheesh, that only increased her fascination with him!

Save my clan.

She would not fail him.

Squaring her shoulders, she hurried back through the stones, toward the castle, and flew up the stairs. Fisting her hand, she knocked on an enormous door that made her feel like a shrunken Alice in a hostile Wonderland. Once, twice, and again. "Halloo, halloo!" she cried. She flung her small frame at it, pounding with her shoulder.

There was no answer. No convenient doorbell either. Her mind duly noted more tangible evidence that what she was knocking on was not a twenty-first-century door. She would contemplate the medieval door later. From the inside. At the moment, she was feeling as if she might faint at any moment. The strangeness of it all left her feeling utterly overwhelmed. And so what if she was a physicist, supposedly capable of heightened comprehension—she was totally freaked out.

"Oh, puh-lease!" she cried, turning around and using her bottom as a battering ram on the thick door. *Thump-thump, thump-thump*. It hurt her more than it hurt the door, and made about as much noise as a downy pillow. She'd be damned if she was getting sent back to save him, only to be denied entrance.

She stepped back and eyed the windows. Perhaps she could toss something through the glass?

Not exactly a wise way to petition shelter from strangers, she decided. Someone might shoot at her. Arrows, or something equally archaic. Perhaps toss boiling oil down the walls.

She cast a glance about and spied a pile of chopped wood. She scurried over to it, freed a wedge, and slammed one end against the door. "Please, open up," she called.

"I'm coming," a sleepy voice replied. "I heard ye the first time. Impatient, aren't ye?" There was the sound of metal sliding against wood, and the door was finally, blessedly opened. Gwen sank to her knees with relief.

A buxom fortyish woman clad in a long gown and lacy cap stood in the doorway, blinking sleep from her eyes. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight huddling on the doorstep, nearly naked.

She whisked Gwen through the door with a strong grip and slammed it behind them. "Och, lassie," she crooned, gathering her in her arms. "Nell's got ye now.

For the love of Columba, what gives ye cause to be wandering so on such a night? An English wench, no less! How came ye here? Did a man have at ye? Did he harm ye, wee lass?"

As the woman drew her to her ample bosom, Gwen thought, *So this is Drustan's Nell*, and sagged against her. She was exactly as he'd described. Assertive and gruffly kind, pretty—past the flush of youth, but with a timeless beauty that would never fade.

Beyond coherent thought, she was dimly astonished to realize her brain was shutting off, as if someone had flipped the main breaker and, circuit by circuit, all systems were going down.

She couldn't crash now! She needed to know what date it was. But her body, overwhelmed and madly off-kilter from her jaunt through the centuries, had other ideas.

"Nell, what's all the commotion?" A man called from somewhere in the perimeter of her awareness.

"Help me with the lass, Silvan," Nell murmured. "'Tis the oddest thing, but she's chilled and her feet are near frozen."

Gwen tried desperately to ask, "What's the date" and "Is he okay?" But damn it all, she was passing out.

Her fading consciousness chuckled richly when she thought she glimpsed Albert Einstein, the greatest theoretical physicist of all time, bending over her, wiry white hair and wrinkled impish face, a mischievous light in his eyes. If she was dying, she was going to be in fine company, indeed. He bent his face close to hers and she managed to whisper, "Drustan."

"Fascinating," she thought she heard him remark. "Let's get her warmed up and put her in the Silver Chamber."

"But that chamber adjoins Drustan's," Nell protested. "'Tis not proper."

"Propriety be damned. 'Tis the most suitable."

Gwen didn't listen further.

Drustan was alive and they were putting her near him. She would rest for a moment.



THE NEXT MORNING

Chapter 12

"Why must ye live all the way up here, Silvan?"

"Yer like the bald eagle nestin' on the mount," Nell said, nudging open the door to his tower chamber—one hundred and three steps above the castle proper—with her hip. "Had to settle on the highest limb, dinna ye?"

Silvan MacKeltar popped his head up out of a book with a bemused expression. A silvery-white mane was sleek about his face, and Nell found him terribly handsome in a sage way, but she'd never tell him that. "I am not bald. I have quite a lot of hair." He lowered his head again and resumed reading, running his finger across the page.

The man was completely in his own world most of the time, Nell mused. Many were the times she'd wondered how he'd managed to get sons on his wife. Had the woman slammed his tomes shut on his fingers and dragged him off by the ear?

Now, there was a fine idea, she thought, watching him through eyes that did not nor had ever, in the twelve years she'd been there, betrayed one ounce of her feelings for him.

"Drink." She plunked the mug down on the table next to his book, careful not to spill a drop on his precious tome.

"Not another of your vile concoctions, is it, Nell?"

"Nay," she said, stony-faced, "'tis another of my splendid brews. And ye need it, so drink. I'm not leaving until the mug is empty."

"Did you put any cocoa in it?"

"Ye know we're nearly out."

"Nell," he said with a put-upon sigh, flipping a page in his book, "go on with you. I'll drink it later."

"And ye might as well know yer son is up and about," she added, hands on her

hips, foot tapping, waiting for him to drink. When he didn't reply, she forged on. "What do ye wish me to do with the lass who appeared last eve?"

Silvan closed his tome, refusing to look at her lest he betray how very much he enjoyed looking at her. He appeased himself with the promise of safely stealing several surreptitious glances when she walked out the door. "You're not going to leave, are you?"

"Not until ye drink."

"How is she?"

"She's sleeping," Nell told his profile. The man rarely looked at her that she noticed; she'd been speaking to his profile for years. "But she doesn't seem to have suffered lasting injury." *Thank the saints*, Nell thought, feeling fiercely protective toward the lass who'd arrived with no clothing and the blood of her maidenhead on her thighs. Neither she nor Silvan had missed it when they tucked the wee unconscious lass into bed. They'd glanced uneasily at each other, and Silvan had fingered the fabric of his son's plaid with a perplexed expression.

"Has she said anything about what happened to her last eve?" he asked, rubbing his thumb idly over the symbols embossed on the leather binding of the book.

"Nay. Although she mumbled in her sleep, naught of it made sense."

Silvan's eyebrows rose. "Think you she was... er, harmed in some way that has affected her mind?"

"I think," Nell said carefully, "the fewer questions ye ask her for now, the better. 'Tis plain to see she needs a place to stay, what with having no possessions nor clothing. I ask ye grant her shelter as ye did me that eve, many years past. Let her story come out when she's ready."

"Well, if she's aught like you, that means I'll never know," Silvan said with studied casualness.

Nell caught her breath. In all these years he'd not once asked what had happened the night she was given sanctuary at Castle Keltar. For him even to make such an offhand reference to it was rarer than a purple pine marten. Privacy was ever honored at the MacKeltars'—sometimes a blessing, oftentimes a curse. The Keltar

men were not wont to pry. And many were the times she'd wished one of them had.

When, a dozen years ago, Silvan had found her lying in the road, beaten and left for dead, she hadn't felt like talking about it. By the time she'd healed and been ready to confide, Silvan—who'd held her hand and fought for her while she'd lain fevered—had retreated coolly from her bedside and never spoken of it again. What was a woman to do? Blurt out her woeful tale as if she were looking for sympathy?

And so a polite and infinite distance had formed between housekeeper and laird. As should be, she reminded herself. She cocked her head warily, warning herself not to read too much into his mild statement.

When she said nothing, Silvan sighed and instructed that she procure suitable clothing for the lass.

"I already dug out some of yer wife's old gowns. Now, would ye please drink? Dinna be thinking I've not noticed that ye haven't been feeling yerself of late. My brew will help if ye quit dumping it in the garderober."

He flushed.

"Silvan, ye hardly eat, ye scarce sleep, and a body needs certain things. Will ye just try it and see if it doesn't help?"

He raised one white brow, giving her a satyrlike look. "Pushy wench."

"Cantankerous old fox."

A faint smile played about his lips. He raised the mug, held his nose, and tipped the contents back. She watched his throat work for several minutes before he grimaced and plunked it down. For a brief moment, their eyes met.

She turned around and swept toward the door. "Dinna be forgetting about the lass," she reminded stiffly. "You need to see to her, assure her she has a place here for however long need be."

"I shan't forget."

Nell inclined her head and stepped out the doorway.

"Nellie."

She froze, her back to him. The man hadn't called her Nellie in years.

He cleared his throat. "Have you done something different with yourself?" When she didn't reply, he cleared his throat again. "You look... er, that is you look rather..." He trailed off, as if regretting even beginning.

Nell spun back around to face him, her brows drawn together, lips pursed. He opened and closed his mouth several times, his gaze drifting over her face. Might he truly have noticed the wee change she'd made? She thought he *never* noticed her. And if he did, would he think she was a silly old woman fussing with herself? "Rather *what*?" she demanded.

"Er... I do believe... the word might be... fetching." Softer somehow, he thought, his gaze skimming her up and down. Ye Gods, but the woman was temptingly soft to begin with.

"Have ye lost yer mind, old man?" she snapped, thoroughly discombobulated, and when Nell was thoroughly discombobulated, she wielded crankiness like a sword. "I look the same as I do every day," she lied. Straightening her spine, she forced herself to glide regally out the door.

But the moment she knew she was out of sight, she rushed down the stairs, skirts a-flying, hair rumbling loose, hands to her throat.

She patted at the wispy strands of hair she'd snipped shorter that morn—similar to the wee lass's, admiring the look. If such a minor change drew—by God, a compliment!—from Silvan MacKeltar, she might just stitch herself that new gown of softest lapis linen she'd been considering.

Fetching, indeed!

* * * * *

Gwen awakened slowly, surfacing from a montage of nightmares in which she'd been running around nude (naturally, at her heaviest weight, *never* after a week of successful dieting), chasing Drustan, and losing him through doors that disappeared before she could reach them.

She took a deep breath, sorting through her thoughts. She'd left the States

because she despised her life. She'd embarked upon a trip to Scotland to lose her virginity, see if she had a heart, and shake up her world.

Well, she'd certainly accomplished all her goals.

No simple cherry picker for me, she thought. I get a time-traveling genius who comes with a world of problems and sends me back through time to fix them.

Not that she minded.

She'd decided the words *soul mate* and *Drustan MacKeltar* were synonymous. She'd finally met a man who made her feel with an intensity she'd never imagined, was brilliant, yet wasn't cold in his brilliance. He knew how to tease and be warm and passionate. He found her beautiful, and he was a phenomenal, erotic lover. Simply, she'd met the perfect man and lost him, all in three days. He'd awakened more emotions in her in that short time than she'd felt in her entire life.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. Although the room was dim, the muted golden light of a fire spilled about the chamber. She blinked at the profusion of purple surrounding her, then recalled Drustan's fascination with the purple running suits in Barrett's. His insistence on purple trews or a T-shirt, a request she'd refused.

That sealed it. She was definitely in Drustan's world now.

A sumptuous violet velvet coverlet was tucked beneath her chin. Above her, a lavender canopy of sheer gauzy stuff draped the elegantly carved cherry bed. A lilac sheepskin—*oh really, she thought, I know there are no lilac sheep*—was spread across her feet. Purple pillows with silver braided trim were strewn about the headboard.

Small curio tables were draped in orchid and plum silks. Brilliant plum and black tapestries in complicated patterns adorned the two tall windows, and between them hung an enormous ornate gilt-framed mirror. Two chairs were arranged before the windows, centered around a table that held silver goblets and plates.

Purple, she mused, with sudden insight. Such an electrifying, energetic man would naturally choose to surround himself with the color that had the highest frequency in the spectrum.

It was a hot color, vivid and erotic.

Like the man himself.

She pressed her nose into the pillow, hoping to catch his scent in the linens, but if he'd slept in this bed it had been too long ago, or the coverings had been changed. She turned her attention to the frame of the exquisitely carved bed in which she lay. The headboard had numerous drawers and cubbyholes. A sweeping footboard was etched with delicate Celtic knotwork. She'd seen a bed like it once before.

In a museum.

This one was as new as anything one might find in a modern-day furniture gallery. Raking her bangs out of her face, she continued surveying the room. Knowing she was in the sixteenth century and *seeing* it were two very different things. The walls were fashioned of pale gray stone, the ceiling was high, and there were none of those moldings or baseboards that always looked so out of place in "renovated" castles frequented by tourists. Not one outlet, not one lamp, merely dozens of glass bowls filled with oil, topped by fat, blackened wicks. The floor was planked of honey-blond wood, polished to a high sheen, with rugs scattered about. A lovely chest sat near the foot of the bed, topped with a pile of folded blankets. More cushioned chairs were arranged before the fire. The fireplace was fashioned of smooth pink stone, with a massive hewn mantel above it. In it, a peat fire steamed, sheaths of heather stacked atop the dried bricks scenting the room. All in all, it was a deliciously warm room, rich and luxurious.

She glanced at her wrist to see what time it was, but apparently her watch had wafted off into the same quantum foam that had devoured her clothing and backpack.

She was momentarily distracted by the garment she was wearing: A long, sheer white chemise edged with lace, it looked positively old-fashioned and frivolous.

She shook her head, swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and felt painfully short when her toes dangled a foot above the floor. With an exasperated hop, she dropped down out of the high bed and hurried to the window. She pulled the tapestry aside to find the sun shining brightly beyond the paned windows. She

fumbled with the latch a moment, then pushed it open and breathed deeply of the fragrant air.

She was in sixteenth-century Scotland. *Wow*.

Beneath her stretched a lovely terraced courtyard, enclosed by the four inner walls of the wing of the castle she was in. Two women were beating rugs against the stones, chatting as they kept an eye on a gaggle of children kicking a lopsided sort of ball about. She peered at it, squinting. *Eeew*, she thought, recalling that Bert had said he'd read that medieval children had played with balls fashioned from bladders of animals and such.

She shook herself abruptly. She needed to know what the date was. While she stood gaping out the window, peril could be drawing ever nearer her Highland lover.

She was about to tug the coverlet off the bed and don it toga-style when she noticed a gown—lavender, of course—lying across the stuffed armchair near the fire, aside a miscellany of other items.

She hurried to the chair, where she fingered the items, trying to decide the order in which she was supposed to put them on.

And there were no panties, she realized with dismay. She could hardly be expected to swish around, bare-bottomed beneath her gown. She glared at the clothing, as if irritation alone might conjure a pair of panties from thin air. She glanced about the room with an entrepreneur's eye but reluctantly concluded that even if she snatched up a table covering, she'd have to knot it about her like a diaper.

She slipped off her nightgown, then slid the soft white undergarment over her head. A simple shift, it clung to her body and fell to midankle. Over it went the gown, then the sleeveless overtunic of darker purple, embroidered with silver threads. Stunned that it didn't drag on the floor, she plucked up the hem and snorted when she saw it had been neatly sheared off. Apparently people had already noted how short she was. She tied the laces on the overtunic beneath her breasts.

The slippers were a joke, sizes too big, but would have to do. She swiped the silk

swath from a table and ripped the sheer fabric. As she was balling it up and stuffing it in the toes, her stomach growled mightily, and she remembered that she hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

But she couldn't just stroll out into the corridor without a plan.

Order of the day: a bathroom, coffee, then at the earliest possible opportunity find Drustan and tell him what had happened.

Tell him... what danger he is in was probably what he'd been saying before he'd melted in the circle of stones. *Show him...* had obviously meant her backpack. She sighed, wishing she had it. But Drustan was a brilliant man with a fine logical mind. Surely, he would see the truth in her story.

In retrospect, it infuriated her that Drustan hadn't told her the whole truth. However, she grudgingly acknowledged, chances were good that if he *had* told her, she would have, with infinite condescension, debated the implausibility of time travel for however long it had taken her to drive him to the nearest psychiatric ward.

She would never have believed he knew how to move in the fourth dimension. Who and what was this man to whom she'd given her virginity?

There was only one way to find out. Find him and talk to him.

Yo, Drustan. You don't know me, but a future you will be enchanted, wake up in the twenty-first century, and send me back to save you and keep your clan from being destroyed.

She frowned. It wasn't something *she'd* believe, if a man showed up in her time with such a story, but Drustan must have known what he was talking about. It was clear that he'd wanted her to tell the "past" him the truth. There was nothing else he could have been trying to say.

She was starved, both for food and a glimpse of Drustan.

And it was urgent that she discover the date. Jamming the slippers on her feet, she hurried out into the corridor.

Chapter 13

Sleeping past sunrise was not a thing Drustan did often, but troubled dreams had disrupted his slumber and he'd slept until long past dawn.

He'd pushed the vague memories away and concentrated instead on the pleasant thoughts of his upcoming wedding. Silvan longed to hear the castle filled with voices again, Nell would be delighted by wee ones scampering about, and Drustan MacKeltar wanted bairn of his own. He would teach his sons to fish and calculate the motion of heavenly bodies. He would teach his daughters the same, he vowed.

He wanted children, and by Amergin, he would get his bride to the altar this time! No matter that he knew naught of her. She was young, of child-bearing age, and he would lavish her with respect and courtesy. Double it, for having him.

And mayhap one day she might come to have feeling for him. Mayhap she was young enough that she might be... er, trainable like a young foal. If she couldn't read and write, she might like to learn. Or she could be weak of sight and not notice the eccentricities of the occupants of Castle Keltar.

And mayhap his wolfhounds would take to sailing longboats across the loch, sporting Viking attire. Waving flags of surrender. Ha.

Anya was his last chance, and he knew it. Because they were Highlanders who kept much to themselves, because of the centuries of rumors, because of the string of broken betrothals, fathers of well-bred young ladies were loath to pledge their daughters to him. They sought for their daughters safe, respectable men to whom rumors didn't cling as tenacious as burrs on a woolen.

Yet the Elliott, laird of an ancient clan of noble lineage, had decided to overlook it all (for two manors and a fair amount of coin) and a match had been promised. Now Drustan merely had to hide his unusual abilities long enough to make Anya Elliott care for him, or at least long enough to get a few bairn. He knew better than to hope for love. Time had taught him that well.

Love, he mused. What would it be like to have a woman look at him with

admiration? Appreciate who he was? Each time he'd begun to believe a woman might care about him, she'd seen or heard something that had frightened her witless and abandoned him, crying, *Pagan! Sorcerer!*

Bah. He was a perfectly respectable Christian. He just happened to be a Druid too, but he suffered no conflicts of faith. God was in everything. As He'd granted His beauty to mighty oaks and crystal lochs, He'd also brushed the stones and the stars with it. Absorbed in the simple perfection of an equation, Drustan's faith deepened, not weakened. Recently, he'd begun regularly attending mass again, intrigued with the intelligent young priest who'd taken over the services at the castle. Endowed with a gentle manner, a quick wit, an addled mother for whom he couldn't be blamed, and an open-mindedness rare in men of the Kirk, Nevin Alexander didn't condemn the MacKeltars for being different. He saw past the rumors to the honorable men within. Mayhap in part because his own mother practiced a few pagan rites.

Drustan was pleased the young priest would be performing the wedding ceremony. Work restoring the lovely chapel in the castle had been accelerated, to have all in readiness.

In anticipation of his future wife's arrival at Castle Keltar, he'd taken precautions. Not only had he warned Silvan and Dageus about unusual displays of talent and mind-boggling conversations, but he'd had the "heretical" tomes removed from the library and toted up for secure storage in Silvan's tower chamber. God willing, she'd be so busy with her aunts and maids who were to accompany her that she wouldn't notice anything odd about any of them. He would not make the same mistakes with Anya Elliott as he'd made with his first three betrotheds. Surely his family could present their best boots forward for only a fortnight!

He would not fail this time, he vowed optimistically.

Unfortunately, no one else in the castle seemed optimistic this morn.

Upon awakening, hungry, and unable to find a single kitchen lass about, he'd wandered down the corridor to the kitchens, calling for Nell, until she'd finally poked her head out of the buttery to see what he wanted.

What did any man want in the morning, he'd teased, besides an energetic tussle between the sheets? Food.

She hadn't smiled and teased back. Casting him side-wise and oddly scathing glances, Nell had complied, following him back to the Greathall and slapping down crusty, week-old bread, flat ale, and a pork pie that he'd begun to suspect contained parts of a pig he'd prefer not to think about.

Where were his treasured kippers and tatties, fried crispy golden? Since when had he, Nell's favorite, rated such meager fare in the morning? On occasion Dageus had been treated in such a poor fashion—usually when he'd done something Nell hadn't appreciated, involving a lass—but not Drustan.

So now he sat alone, wishing someone, anyone, even young Tristan, the bright lad they were training in basic Druidry, might saunter in with a *hullo* or a smile. He was not a man given to dark moods, yet this morning his entire world felt off-balance, and he couldn't shake a niggling sense of foreboding that it was about to get worse.

"So?" Silvan said, popping his head into the Greathall, skewering him with his intense gaze. "Where were you last night?" The rest of him followed at a more leisurely pace. Drustan smiled faintly. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never get used to his father's gait. Headfirst, the rest of him trailing behind, as if he tolerated his body only because it was necessary to tote his head about from place to place.

He took a swill of flat ale and said dryly, "Good morning to you too, Da." Was everyone out of sorts this morn? Silvan hadn't even bothered with a greeting. Just a question that had sounded much like an accusation and had made him feel like a lad again, caught slipping back in from a nocturnal dalliance with a serving wench.

The elderly Keltar paused inside the doorway, leaned back against the stone column, and folded his arms across his chest. Too busy pondering the mysteries of the universe and scribbling in his journals to indulge in training or swordplay, Silvan was nearly as tall as Drustan, but much narrower of frame.

Drustan forced himself to swallow a mouthful of what he was becoming convinced was pig-tail pie. *Crunch-crunch*. By Amergin, what had Nell put in the thing? he wondered, trying not to look at the filling overmuch. Did she bake horrid things in advance to ply upon whomever upset her in some fashion?

"I said, where were you?" Silvan repeated.

Drustan frowned. Aye, Silvan was definitely out of sorts. "Sleeping. And you?"

He plucked an unidentifiable from his plate and offered it to one of the hounds beneath the table. Curling its lip, the animal growled and backed away. Drustan frowned dubiously at the pie before glancing back at his father. Silvan looked his age this morning, and that depressed and irritated Drustan.

Depressed him because Silvan *was* his age, all of three score and two. Irritated him because recently his father had taken to wearing his hair loose around his shoulders, which, in Drustan's opinion, made him look even older, and he didn't like to be reminded of his father's mortality. He wanted his children to have their grandfather around for a very long time. Silvan's hair was no longer the thick black of his prime, but shoulder length, snowy white, and possessed of a personality of its own. Coupled with the flowing blue robe he favored, he projected an unkempt, mad-philosopher look.

Tugging the leather thong from his hair, he tossed it at his father and was relieved to see his da was still spry enough to catch it with a hand above his head.

"What?" Silvan asked peevishly, glancing at it. "What would I be wanting with this?"

"Tie it back. Your hair is making me mad."

Silvan arched a white brow. "I like it this way. For your information, the priest's mother quite likes my hair. She told me so just last week."

"Da, stay away from Nevin's mother," Drustan said, making no attempt to conceal his distaste. "I vow, that woman tries to read my fortune every time I see her.

Ever creeping about, spouting gloom and doom. She's daft, Besseta is. Even Nevin thinks so." He shook his head and popped a crust of bread in his mouth, then washed it down with a swig of ale. The pork pie had defeated him. He shoved the platter away, refusing to look at it.

"Speaking of women, son, what have you to tell me about the wee one that

appeared here last eve?"

Drustan lowered his mug to the table with a thump, in no mood for one of his father's cryptic conversations. He slid the pork pie down the table toward his father. "Care for some pie, Da?" he offered. Silvan probably wouldn't even notice anything wrong with it. To him, food was food, necessary to keep the body toting the head around. "And I doona know what lass you're talking about."

"The one who collapsed on our steps yestreen, wearing naught but her skin and your plaid," Silvan said, ignoring the pie. "The chieftain's plaid, the only one that's woven with silver threads."

Drustan stopped brooding over his measly breakfast, his attention fully engaged. "Collapsed? Indeed?"

"Indeed. An English lass."

"I've seen no English lass this morning. Nor last eve." Mayhap the lass Silvan was going on about was the reason he'd gotten the offensive pork pie. Nell had a soft heart, and he'd bet one of his prized Damascus daggers that if an abused lass had appeared on the doorstep, she was the one dining on golden kippers and tatties and soft poached eggs. Mayhap even Cloutie dumplings, oatcakes, and orange marmalade. On more than one occasion women from other clans had sought refuge at the castle, seeking employment or the chance to start life anew with people who didn't know them. Nell herself had found such refuge there.

"What does the lass say happened to her?" Drustan asked.

"She was in no condition to answer questions when she appeared, and Nell says she hasn't yet awakened."

Drustan eyed his father a moment, his eyes narrowing. "Are you insinuating that *I'm* responsible for her presence?" When Silvan made no move to deny it, Drustan snorted. "Och, Da, she may have found one of my old plaids anywhere. It was like as not threadbare and had been tossed in the stables to be cut up into birthing rags for the sheep."

Silvan sighed. "I helped carry her to her chamber, son. She had the blood of her maidenhead on her thighs. And she was naked, and she had *your* plaid wrapped around her. A crisp new one, not an old one. Can you see how I might be

perplexed?"

"So *that's* why Nell served me week-old fare." Drustan pushed back his chair and rose, bristling with indignation. "Surely you doona believe I had aught to do with it, do you?"

Silvan rubbed his jaw wearily. "I'm merely trying to understand, son. She said your name before she swooned. And last week Besseta said—"

"Doona even think of telling me what some twig-reading fortune-teller—"

"That there is a darkness around you that worries her—"

"Such a fortuitous choice of words. A *darkness*. Which, conveniently, could be anything that comes to pass. A bad stomach from a pork pie, a wee cut in a sword fight. Doona you see how vague that is? You should be ashamed of yourself, a man of learning, the senior Keltar no less."

They glared at each other.

"Stubborn, ungrateful, and bad-tempered," Silvan snapped.

"Conniving, interfering, and bristly-haired," Drustan shot back.

"Disrespectful and impotent," Silvan thrust neatly.

"I am not! I am perfectly virile—"

"Well, you certainly couldn't prove that by your seed, which—*if* it's being scattered—*isn't* taking root."

"I take precautionary measures," Drustan thundered.

"Well, *stop*. You've a score and ten, and I've double that. Think you I'll be livin' forever? At this point, I'd welcome a bastard. And you can rest assured that should the lass turn out to be pregnant, I'll be calling the bairn MacKeltar."

They scowled at each other, then Silvan suddenly flushed, his gaze fixed on a distant point beyond Drustan's shoulder.

Drustan froze, as *he felt* a new presence in the room. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

He spun around slowly, and time seemed to stop when he saw her. His breath slammed to a halt in his chest, and he positively sizzled beneath the heat of her stare.

Christ, Drustan thought, staring into eyes that were stormy and lovely as the fierce Scottish sea, she's wee, and vulnerable-looking, and utterly beautiful. No wonder she's got Da and Nell in such a fankle.

She was a walking siren song, humming with mating heat. One hand was on the elegant marble banister of the stair, the other hand pressed to her abdomen, as if pondering the possibility that she might be pregnant.

Would that he had taken her maidenhead, but he hadn't—he'd not taken any woman's maidenhead—and furthermore he would never have left her wandering about outside afterward.

Nay, he thought, staring at her, he would have kept this woman tucked securely in his bed, in his arms, warm and slippery from his loving. And loving. And more loving. She did some witchy thing to his blood.

Silver-blond hair fell in a straight sheen past her shoulders and halfway down her back. She had strange, fringed lengths of hair over her forehead that she puffed from her eyes with a soft exhalation of breath, which made her lower lip look even poutier. Small of stature, but with curves that could make a grown man weak at the knees—and indeed his had turned to water—she was wearing a gown of his favorite color that did lovely things to her breasts. It was sheer enough to reveal her nipples, cut low enough to frame her curves in timeless temptation. Her cheekbones were high, her nose straight, her eyebrows winged upward at the outer edges, and her eyes...

Christ, the way she was staring at him was enough to make his skin steam.

She was staring as if she knew him intimately. He doubted he'd ever seen such an intense and unashamed look of desire in a woman's eyes.

And, of course, his ever-astute father didn't miss it.

"Now, tell me again you doona know her, lad," Silvan said wryly. "For of a certain she seems to know you."

Drustan shook his head, bewildered. He felt a fool, standing and staring, but try as he might he could not drag his gaze away from hers. Her eyes turned gently imploring, as if she was hoping for something from him or trying to communicate a silent message. Where had such a wee beauty come from? And why was she having such a profound effect upon him? Granted, she was lovely, but he'd known many lovely women. His betrotheds had been some of the most beautiful women in the Highlands.

Yet none had ever made him feel quite so virile and hungry and intensely possessive.

Such stirrings did not bode well for his plans of impending marital bliss.

After an interminable silence, he spread his hands, confused. "I vow, I've never seen her before in my life, Da."

Silvan crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at Drustan. "Then why is she staring at you like that? And if you didn't bed her last night, how do you explain the condition she arrived in?"

"Oh, my," the lass sputtered then. "You think he—*oh*. I hadn't considered that." She heaved a huge sigh and pinched her lower lip, staring at them.

About time she spoke up to clear his name, he thought, waiting.

"Well?" Silvan encouraged. "Did he tup you last eve?"

She hesitated a moment, glancing between the two men, then gave an uncertain wobble of the head, which Drustan promptly interpreted as a "no."

"See? I told you so, Da," Drustan said, relieved that she'd finally looked away from him. Righteous indignation flooded him. "I doona have to seduce maidens, not with so many experienced lasses vying for the pleasure of my bed." Women might not want to wed him, but that certainly didn't prevent them from crawling into his bed at every opportunity. Ofttimes he suspected the very rumors about him that drove them from the altar were the same lure that enticed them to seek his bed. Fickle like that, lasses were. Attracted to danger for a night or two, but of no mind to live with it.

When the tiny lass glared at him, he flashed her a puzzled look. Why would she

be offended by his prowess with the wenches?

"Forgive my indelicate question, lass," Silvan said, "but who removed your... er, maidenhead? Was it one of our people?"

Typical that his father couldn't let it go. It hadn't been *him*, and that was all Drustan needed to hear. Under normal circumstances he would have scoured the estate for the erstwhile suitor who'd deflowered and callously abandoned her, and seen to it she was granted whatever recompense she wished, were it one of their own, but his da had thought *he* had taken her maidenhead, and that offended him.

Dismissing her from his thoughts—in large part to prove to himself that he *could*—he turned away to find Nell, clear this matter up with her, and procure an edible breakfast, but froze in his tracks when she spoke again.

"*He* did," she said, sounding both petulant and irritated.

Drustan pivoted slowly. She looked nearly as shocked by her own words as was he.

She wilted beneath the stress of his regard, then mumbled, "But I wanted him to."

Drustan was incensed. How dare she accuse him falsely? What if his betrothed heard tell of it? If Anya's father heard of this wee woman claiming he'd callously deflowered her, then renounced her, he might call off the nuptials!

Whoever she was—she was not going to wreak havoc on his unborn children.

Growling, he crossed the space between them in three swift strides, scooped her up with one arm, and tossed her over his shoulder, a controlling hand splayed on her rump.

A controlling hand that didn't fail to appreciate that rump, which made him angrier still.

Ignoring his father's protests, he stalked to the door, jerked it open, and tossed the lying wench out, headfirst, into a prickly bush.

Feeling simultaneously vindicated and like the sorriest rogue in all of Alba, he

slammed the door shut, slid the bolt, backed himself against it, and folded his arms over his chest, as if he'd barred the door against something far more dangerous than a simple lying lass. As if Chaos herself was currently wedged in his hedges, dad in irresistible lavender and mating heat.

"And that's the end of *that*," he told Silvan firmly. But it didn't come out sounding quite as firm as he'd intended. In truth, his voice rose slightly at the end, and his assertion bore a questioning inflection. He scowled to more properly punctuate it, while Silvan gaped at him, speechless.

Had he ever seen his father speechless before? he wondered uneasily.

Somehow, he had a feeling that dumping the lying lass out into the prickly bush hadn't put an end to anything.

Indeed, he suspected that whatever was going on, it had only begun. Were he a more superstitious man, he might have fancied he heard the creaking wheels of destiny as they turned.

Chapter 14

Gwen sputtered indignantly as she backed out of the bush, plucking prickly leaves from her hair. There she was, less than twelve hours later, on her hands and knees on the confounded doorstep *again*.

Incensed, she threw her head back and yelled, "Let me in!"

The door remained firmly shut.

She sat back on her heels and pounded a fist on the door. The argument that had erupted inside the castle was so loud that she knew they'd never hear her over such a racket.

She took a deep breath and reflected upon what she'd just done, thinking that a cigarette would go a long way toward clearing her mind, and a cup of strong coffee might just restore her sanity.

Okay, she admitted, *that was abjectly stupid*. She'd said singularly the worst thing she could have said, guaranteed to piss him off.

But she'd been through a lot in the past twenty-four hours, and logic hadn't exactly been the ruling planet in her little universe when Drustan turned his back on her. Emotion, that great big unexplored planet, had been exerting an irresistible pull on her wits. She didn't have enough practice with emotions to handle them with finesse, and by God, the man made her feel so many that it was simply bewildering.

When she'd first seen him, she stood at the top of the stairs for several moments, gazing at him with her heart in her eyes, scarcely hearing the conversation going on below.

He was devastating in any century. Even when she'd thought him mentally unhinged, she'd found him dangerously appealing. In his natural element, he was twenty times as irresistible. Now that she knew he was a genuine sixteenth-century lord, she wondered how she could have ever believed otherwise. He dripped regal authority as blatantly as he wore his sexuality. He was a man who thoroughly enjoyed being a man.

Ecstatic that he was alive and well and that she'd arrived in time to save him, she'd rushed down the stairs. Then Drustan's father, Silvan, the man she'd mistaken for Einstein, had mentioned something about her being pregnant, flummoxing her. Confronted with a possible pregnancy before even latching her lips to the rim of a cup of Starbucks, she'd stood, stupefied.

It's not enough just to buy condoms, Cassidy; you have to use them.

And then Drustan had tossed his silky mane over his shoulder and looked right at her, and although his eyes had flared as if he'd found her attractive, there had been no spark of recognition.

She'd expected it.

She'd *known* he wouldn't know her. Still, her heart had not understood how awful it was going to feel when he turned that silvery, sexy gaze on her, as distant and cold as a stranger.

Rational or not, it had hurt, and then he'd made that wise-ass comment about women vying for the pleasure of his bed.

Then, as if he hadn't poked every one of her raw nerves already, he'd turned his back on her, dismissing her.

It was at that point that she'd reacted blindly. She'd blurted out the *one* thing she knew would make him turn back around and look at her again. She'd sacrificed long-term goals for instant gratification.

She was appalled by what she'd done. It was no wonder her mother had so stridently counseled against being emotional. Emotion apparently made fools of even geniuses.

She needed him to listen to her, and he wasn't going to be in any mood to hear her now. By telling him they'd been lovers *before* telling him the whole story, she'd irritated and provoked him.

"Let me in." She pounded on the door. "I need to tell you the whole story." But they were still arguing so loudly that she might as well have been whispering.

Brushing leaves from her gown, she rose to her feet. She scowled at the door.

Since no one would answer and the argument showed no signs of abating, she tipped her head back, eager to see the castle in daylight, but she was too close to it. She felt like a flea trying to get a good look at an elephant while perched upon its forehead. Curious, she decided she may as well take a short walk.

Tucking her bangs behind her ear, she turned around.

And froze.

Her heart slammed into her throat. *Impossible*, her mind wailed.

But there he was, plain as day. Sinfully, heart-stoppingly sexy Drustan.

Sauntering up the steps toward her, clad in leather trews and a linen shirt, casually unlaced, revealing a mouth-watering amount of hard, bronzed chest. Although the brilliant morning sun was behind him, shadowing his features, his smile was dazzling.

Yet, behind her in the castle, Drustan was yelling. She could *hear* him.

According to her understanding of physics, both of them couldn't exist at the same time. But obviously they did. What would happen if they met? Would one of them just blip out of existence?

If Drustan-behind-the-door was the one that didn't know her, she reasoned, then Drustan-on-the-steps who looked so happy to see her must be *her* Drustan.

What was she going to do with two Drustans?

A kinky part of her proposed something unmentionable... and rather fascinating. Really, if they were both *him*, it wouldn't be like she was cheating on anyone.

Blushing, she ogled him from head to toe. *Her* Drustan didn't scowl at her. He arched a brow in that oh-so-familiar way of his and grinned, opening his arms wide.

She didn't hesitate.

With a shriek of delight, she launched herself at him. He caught her midleap and pulled her legs around his waist, just like in her century.

He laughed when she covered his face with little kisses. She had no idea what she would do with two of them, or how it could be possible, she knew only that she'd missed him more in the past twelve hours than she'd ever missed anyone in her entire life. "Kiss me," she said.

"Och, English, I'll be kissing you most thoroughly," he purred against her lips. Clamping her head between his hands, he slanted his mouth hungrily over hers.

Gwen melted against him, parting her lips. There was no doubt about it; the man was an expert kisser. His kiss was demanding, aggressive, silky, hot, and hungry... and any minute now she'd feel the sizzle.

Any minute now, she thought, kissing him back with all of her heart.

He tasted of cinnamon and wine, and he kissed her with single-minded intensity, and still... no sizzle.

"*Mmph*," she said against his mouth, meaning, *Wait a minute, something's not right*. But if he heard her, he paid no mind and deepened the kiss.

Gwen's head spun. Something was seriously wrong. Something about Drustan was different, and his kiss wasn't affecting her as it usually did. Distantly, she heard the door open behind them and tried to draw back, but he wouldn't let her.

Then she heard a roar and was dragged off Drustan by the other Drustan, with one steely arm about her waist, another around her neck.

She glanced rapidly between them, blinking and hoping her double vision would go away. They were glaring at each other. Would they fight? If she saw her own double she'd probably be tempted to punch it once or twice. Especially today. For being so stupid.

"What's wrong with you?" Passion and irritation glittered in leather-trew-clad Drustan's eyes.

"What's wrong with *me*?" kilt-clad Drustan snapped. "What's wrong with me is that this wench here, who was kissing you so ravenously, accused *me* of taking her virginity!" Kilt-clad Drustan dumped her on her feet between them. "I'm trying to save you, before she tangles you in her deceitful web."

"I *liked* her deceitful web. It was hot and slippery, and all a lass should be," Drustan-of-the-leather-trews growled.

Kilt-clad Drustan launched into a diatribe with a burr so thick she could scarcely understand a word he was saying, and Drustan of the trews began yelling back, and then Silvan poked his nose out of the castle to observe the fracas.

She'd lost her mind, she thought, watching with wide eyes. They stood nose to nose, arguing, while she plucked nervously at her gown, backed up a few steps, and listened, hoping to catch a word or two she might understand.

Observe. There is a logical explanation for this, the scientist insisted.

"Drustan. Dageus," Silvan said reprovingly. "Stop your arguing this moment."

Dageus! A ray of enlightenment pierced her confusion.

Her nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. It was one more thing Drustan hadn't bothered to tell her—that he and his brother were identical twins. It seemed there were oodles of things he'd overlooked. He'd nearly given her a heart attack over this one. He certainly hadn't made saving him easy.

She kicked the real Drustan in the shin. "You didn't tell me you and your brother were twins."

He continued arguing with Dageus as if she'd barely touched him, and no wonder with such flimsy little slippers. What she wouldn't give for her hiking boots.

And now I have two problems, she thought. Dageus was still alive, which meant she had to prevent his death too. She was elated to have the opportunity to save Dageus, but she was beginning to feel a little overwhelmed. Discovering the date was a serious priority, and she had to get her hands on Dageus's itinerary. There was no way he could go anywhere near the Elliott's estate.

Now that they were standing side by side, she could discern differences and would not mistake the two of them again. They weren't quite identical, probably half-identical; polar body twins, giving them about seventy-five percent of the same DNA. Had the sun not been so bright behind him as he'd walked up, she might not have erred in the first place. Dageus was indeed an inch or two shorter,

which still made him at least six foot four. His hair—which she hadn't been able to see when he'd been walking toward her—pulled back in a thong as it was—was much longer, falling to his waist, and so black it was nearly blue. And their eyes were different, she thought, sidling closer between them, ducking wildly gesturing arms, to get a good look. *Oh, and how*, she thought, for as silvery as Drustan's were, Dageus's were yellow-gold.

Wow. All in all, two of the most gloriously handsome men she'd ever seen.

Drustan stopped cursing and glowered at her. "Who *are* you?" he demanded, finally rubbing his shin.

"I've been trying to tell you, but the moment you hear something you don't like, do you ask questions to try to clear it up?" she demanded, hands on her hips and glaring back at him. "No. Not even one. You behave like a barbarian." Not that she'd done much better, but wiser to go on the offensive than justify her own failings. "I thought you were smarter than that."

Drustan opened his mouth and closed it again. *Ha*, she thought smugly, the offensive had worked.

Dageus's brows rose and he laughed. "I must say, for being such a wee—"

"I am not a *nyaff*" she said defensively.

"—lass, she certainly has fire."

"And it's a fire you can keep your hands off," Drustan snapped. He looked bewildered by his own words and added hastily, "I doona want you to get snared in her trap. 'Tis apparent she's looking for someone to marry her."

"I am not looking for someone to marry me," Gwen said firmly. "I'm looking for someone with a modicum of intellect."

"Ahem. That would be me, m'dear," Silvan said mildly, raising an ink-spotted hand.

Drustan scowled at his father.

"Well, that *would* be," Silvan said, crossing his arms over his bony frame and leaning back against the door-jamb. "You doona see *me* standing out there

shouting my head off when a few simple questions might clear things up nicely."

"I'd say that qualifies," Gwen said, tucking her arm through Silvan's. She wasn't going to get anything accomplished trying to talk to Drustan right now. Let him cool off outside for a while. She swept into the castle, towing Silvan along, and kicked the door shut with her heel.

* * * * *

"I can't tell you," Gwen told Silvan for the third time, already regretting having come inside with him. The moment they'd entered the castle, the inquisition had begun, and until she talked to Drustan, she dare not tell Silvan a thing. She'd already made one mistake this morning. She was not going to make another. She would tell Drustan and only Drustan. He could tell whomever he trusted.

"Well, what can you tell me? Anything?" Gwen sighed. She'd taken an instant liking to Silvan MacKeltar—another of those baffling gut instincts—the moment she'd seen him standing in the hall interrogating his son, with so much love in his eyes. She'd felt a twinge of envy, wondering what it must feel like to be the focus of such parental concern. Not only did he resemble Einstein, with his white hair, olive-toned skin, curious brown eyes feathered by wrinkles, and deep grooves bracketing his mouth, but he demonstrated a similar acuity of mind.

Perched on the hearth in the Greathall, she glanced at the door, hoping Drustan would saunter in. Angry or not, she needed desperately to talk with him. "I told you my name," she hedged.

"Rubbish. That tells me naught but that you're English with Irish ancestors, and a damned odd accent. How do you know Drustan?"

She regarded him glumly.

"How am I supposed to help you, m'dear, if you refuse to tell me a thing? If my son took your maidenhead, 'tis wedding you he'll be. But I can't force him if you doona tell me who you are and a bit about what happened."

"Mr. MacKeltar—"

"Silvan," he interrupted.

"Silvan," Gwen amended, "I don't want you to force Drustan to marry me."

"Then what do you want?" he exclaimed.

"More than anything right now?"

"Aye."

"I'd like to know what the date is." She hated asking it so baldly, but she needed to know. She drew some comfort from the fact that Dageus was still alive—it meant she'd arrived in time. But she wouldn't feel entirely safe until she knew precisely, to the minute, how long she had.

Silvan went very still, his dark eyes narrowed, head cocked at an angle. She suddenly had the eerie feeling he was listening with more than his ears, and watching with more than his eyes.

And she knew she was right when he murmured softly, "Och, m'dear, you're from a far far place, aren't you, now? Nay, no need to reply. I doona understand what I sense, but I know you're a stranger to this land."

"What are you doing, reading my mind? Can you *do* that?" She might believe anything of a man who'd fathered a son who could manipulate time.

"Nay. 'Tis but a bit of deep listening in the old way, something neither of my sons are adept at, although I've tried to teach them. So'tis the date you're needing," he said slowly. "I'll trade you answers, what say you, Gwen Cassidy?"

"I'm not going to get them any other way, am I?"

He shook his head, a faint smile playing at his lips.

"I'll answer your questions as honestly as I can," she conceded, "but there are bound to be some that I can't answer just yet."

"Fair enough. As long as you doona lie to me, m'dear, we'll get on fine. If you can't tell me what transpired last eve, then tell me *why* you can't."

That was reasonably safe. "Because I must talk to Drustan first. If, once I talk with Drustan, he chooses to, he can tell you everything."

Silvan held her gaze, weighing her words for truth.

"'Tis the nineteenth day of July," he said finally.

About a month, Gwen thought, relieved. When Drustan had discovered that he was in the future, he said, *Christ, I haven't lost a mere moon. I've lost centuries.* Translation: Initially he thought he had been in the cave for a month or so, which meant he'd been abducted somewhere in mid-August. He'd also said that Dageus had died "recently." She'd had no idea how recent his grief had been and had assumed he'd meant several months or even a year ago. But apparently Dageus would die at some point in the next few weeks. She needed to know exactly when Dageus planned to leave for the Elliott's; she had to prevent him from going at all.

"Fifteen eighteen?" She hated wasting a question, but had to be sure. Considering that Drustan had gotten the month and day wrong, she supposed it was possible he'd messed up on the year too.

Silvan's eyes evinced utter fascination. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and peered at her. "Where are you from?" he breathed.

She sighed and averted her gaze, half-afraid the canny man could read the answers in her eyes. She blinked, momentarily distracted by her first real look at the Greathall. When she'd come downstairs, she'd scarce seen past Drustan. The hall was elegant and lovely as her chamber had been, the floor fashioned of spotlessly scrubbed pale gray stones, the walls lined with brilliant tapestries. Two hounds snored softly beneath a large masterpiece of a table. Heavy velvet drapes were pulled back from tall paned windows, and the rosy marble double staircase gleamed in the morning light. A panel of stained glass was inset above the massive door, and silver shields and weapons adorned the walls on either side. "It's a country you've never heard of," she demurred, not about to say the good old U.S. of A. That would start a whole other conversation that could go on indefinitely.

"Tell me, or you'll get no answers from me. Really, where you're from can hardly be too revealing, can it, now?"

She blew out a frustrated breath. "America. Far across the ocean."

Again, he assessed her with his steady stare. "Fifteen eighteen," he agreed. "And I know of the Americas. We doona call it that, but we Scots discovered it

centuries ago."

"You did not," she scoffed. "Christopher Columbus—"

"Merely followed the Sinclair's path, after he got his hands on the old maps left to the Templars."

"*Oooh*. You Scots have got to be the most arrogant—"

"What a conundrum you are proving—"

"Do you always talk over people?"

He snorted with laughter. "You do it rather well yourself," he said, smiling and patting her hand. "I think I'm going to like you quite a lot, lass. So, when do you plan to tell Drustan, so I may hear the whole story?"

"The minute he walks in. And thanks for giving me an easy question."

"That's not fair, that wasn't a—"

"Uh-uh. No way you're reneging now. That was too a question."

"Aye, but not really and you know it," Silvan grumbled. He averted his nose in a snit, a flicker of admiration in his eyes. "You're a clever lass, aren't you, now? Next?" he said dryly.

"Is Dageus planning to take any trips soon?" .

"What a very odd question," Silvan remarked, stroking his chin. "I must say you've got my curiosity in quite a lather. Aye, he is to go to the Elliott's soon. Did Drustan take your virginity?"

She blew out a breath slowly. "It's a very complicated story," she evaded, "and I must speak to Drustan as soon as possible. Your son is in danger. I believe he trusts you completely; however, he must decide what to tell you. I can't say any more than that until he and I talk. Please respect that," she added softly.

He arched a brow, but nodded.

When he took her hand between his and patted it, she felt funny inside. She couldn't recall her own father ever doing such a thing. He held her hand for a

few moments, his eyes narrowed, his expression pensive. She had the distinct, unsettling sensation that he was peering right into her soul. Was that possible? she wondered.

"All right, m'dear," Silvan said. "You win. No more questions until you speak with Drustan. But if I know my son, he'll not cooperate."

"He must, Silvan," Gwen said desperately. "We don't have all that much time."

"Is he truly in danger?"

Gwen closed her eyes and sighed. "You all are."

"Then we will make him listen to you." Gwen opened her eyes and scowled.

"And how do you plan to make him do that? Lock him in a room with me?"

Silvan smiled faintly, deepening the lines about his mouth. Elderly though he was, he was a handsome man with no small amount of charisma. She wondered why he'd never married again. Surely not for lack of women being interested.

"Not a bad idea, m'dear. Will you do as I say?"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded.

And he bent his head close to hers and began whispering.

Chapter 15

Hours later, an anxious Gwen paced before the fire in the Silver Chamber. The day had dragged endlessly on with no sign of Drustan. If he'd only return, she'd clear things up and they could set about figuring out who the enemy was.

After a scrumptious breakfast of poached eggs, potatoes, and dried, salted fish in the hall with Silvan, Nell had given her a brief tour, pointing out garderobes and the like. She'd spent a few hours in the library, then had retired to her chamber to await Drustan.

Dageus had ridden in a few hours ago, without him. He said they'd parted ways at the tavern. Silvan had drawn his younger son—younger by a mere three minutes—into their plan, and Dageus, grinning and casting Gwen steamy glances—did he *have* to drip as much raw sex appeal as Drustan?—now held the door to the corridor ajar a crack, watching for Drustan's approach. He'd been spotted riding into the stable a quarter hour past.

"I can't believe you placed her in the chamber that adjoins Drustan's," Dageus said over his shoulder.

Silvan shrugged defensively. "She said his name last night, and besides, 'tis the third nicest in the castle. Yours and Drustan's are the only two more lavishly furnished."

"I'm not certain she should be sleeping so close to him."

"Where should I move her? Nearer to your chamber?" Silvan countered.

"Drustan denies knowing her. You kissed her. Who poses more of a threat to her?"

Gwen flushed, grateful that Dageus didn't point out that she'd *demand*ed he kiss her. He glanced at her side-wise and flashed her a seductive look. God, he was gorgeous, she thought, watching his glossy waist-length hair slide silkily as he angled his head to argue over his shoulder with Silvan. How could two such devastating men exist in one castle? Not that she was attracted to him, but she'd have to be dead not to appreciate his raw male virility.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked Silvan, nudging the conversation in a less disconcerting direction.

He smiled faintly. "Doona fash yourself over my motives, m'dear."

"You would be wise to fash yourself over his motives, lass," Dageus cautioned dryly. "When Da bothers to involve himself, he always has ulterior motives. Schemes within schemes. And inevitably, he knows more than he lets on."

"Do you?" She peered at the charming, grand-fatherly man.

"Innocent as a little lamb ambling the hillside, m'dear," Silvan said mildly.

Dageus shook his head at her. "Doona believe a word of it. But nor should you waste your breath trying to get more out of him. He's quiet as the grave with his little secrets."

"I'm not the only one who keeps secrets around here, lad," Silvan said with a sharp glance. Father and son battled with their gazes a few moments, then Dageus dropped his eyes and looked back out into the corridor.

An awkward silence reigned, and Gwen wondered what she was missing, what secrets a man like Dageus kept. Feeling like the perpetual outsider-looking-in, she changed the subject again. "Are you sure he won't listen? Are you certain we need to go to such extremes?" A pile of wood planks and bolts lay near the adjoining door, and the longer Gwen looked at it, the more nervous she became.

"M'dear, you accused him of taking your maidenhead. Nay, he'll not speak to you if he can avoid it."

Dageus nodded agreement. "He's coming," he warned them.

"Into the boudoir with you, m'dear," Silvan urged. "When you hear him enter his chamber, count to ten, then join him. I'll block this door and Dageus will take the other. We won't permit him to leave until you've had your say."

Squaring her shoulders, Gwen drew a deep breath and plunged into the boudoir. She listened intently for the sound of Drustan's door opening and realized to her chagrin that she was trembling.

She flinched when she heard the door open, and counted to ten slowly, giving

Dageus time to sneak out of her chamber and blockade the door from the corridor.

Silvan had chuckled when he'd told her that if Drustan refused to listen, he and Dageus would do their best to bar him in from the outside by hammering a plank or two over the doors. God, she hoped it didn't come to that!

Time was up. She turned the handle and quietly opened the door.

His back was to her, and he was facing the fire, staring into it. He'd changed into snug leather pants, a billowy linen shirt, and boots. His silky black hair spilled unbound over his shoulders and down his back. He looked as if he'd stepped straight off the cover of one of those romance novels she ordered from Amazon.com so she didn't have to be embarrassed by some supercilious male clerk in the bookstore.

Ha, she thought. When she returned to her time, she was going to start buying them flagrantly, with no apologies. She'd never seen a man blush while buying *Playboy*.

But she had to survive the wrath of Drustan MacKeltar first.

Murmuring a silent prayer, she closed the door behind her.

He spun around the moment it clicked shut, and when he saw her, his silver eyes glittered dangerously.

Shaking a finger, he stalked toward her, and she skittered away from the door in case he planned to toss her out it again. He followed like a magnet to steel.

"Doona even think, English, that I'll be tolerating more of your lies," he said with silky menace. "And best you get out of my chamber, because I've had enough whisky that I'm of a mind to taste the crime of which I've been accused." His gaze drifted meaningfully to the massive bed, draped in silk and covered with velvet pillows.

Gwen's eyes widened. Indeed, his expression was a combination of fury and raw lust. The raw lust was perfectly wonderful; the anger she'd cheerfully do without.

She was going to be cool and rational this time. No stupid comments, no

emotional outbursts. She would tell him what had happened, and he would see reason.

She hastened to reassure him. "I'm not trying to get you to marry me—"

"Good, because I won't," he growled, closing the distance between them, using his body to intimidate her.

She planted her feet and held her ground. Given that her nose came only to his solar plexus, it wasn't as easy as she made it look.

"What's this?" he purred softly. "You doona fear me? You should fear me, English." He closed his hands around her upper arms like bands of steel.

Silvan and Dageus must be pressing their ears to the doors, waiting for his explosion, she thought, but they'd misjudged him. This was not a man who exploded—he seethed quietly and infinitely more dangerously.

"Answer me," he demanded, shaking her. "Are you such a fool that you have no fear of me?"

She'd rehearsed her speech a dozen times, yet when he stood so close to her, it was difficult to remember where she'd decided to begin. Her lips parted as she stared up at him. "Please—"

"Please what?" he said silkily, lowering his head to hers. "Please kiss you? Please take you the way you accuse me of already having had you? I've had a long time to think today, English, and I must confess that I find myself fascinated by you. I rode for hours before stopping in the tavern. I drank for hours, yet fear all the whisky in fair Alba wouldn't cleanse you from my mind. Have you spelled me, witch?"

"No, I have not spelled you, I am not a witch, and please *don't* kiss me," she managed. God, she wanted him! Whether he knew her or not, it was *her* Drustan, damn it all, just a month and five centuries younger.

"Och, that's a rare request from a woman," he mocked. "Especially one who says she's already tasted my loving. Do you now disparage my intimate attentions?" His gaze was silver ice, challenging. "Was I less than satisfying? You claim we're lovers; mayhap we should be again. It would seem I've left a less than

favorable impression." He closed his hand about her wrist and tugged her toward the bed. "Come."

She dug her heels in, a feat in soft slippers on a planked wood floor.

Her protests whooshed from her lungs when he scooped her into his arms and tossed her onto the bed. She landed on her back, sank deep into velvet-covered feather mattresses, and, before she could scramble away, he was on top of her, his body stretched the length of hers, pinning her with his weight.

She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of his beautiful, angry face. She would *never* be able to carry on a meaningful conversation with him in this position.

"Drustan, please listen to me. I'm not trying to trap you into marriage, and there's a reason why I said what I said this morning, if you'll just listen," she said, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

"There's a reason why you lied? There's *never* a reason to lie, lass," he growled.

"Does that mean *you* never lie?" she said snidely, opening her eyes a slit and peeping at him. She was still miffed that he hadn't told her the entire truth before sending her back.

"Nay, I doona lie."

"Bullshit. Sometimes, not telling all of the truth is exactly the same thing as lying," she snapped.

"Such language from a lady. But you're no lady, are you?"

"Well, you're certainly no gentleman. This lady didn't *ask* you to throw her in your bed."

"But you like being beneath me, lass," he said huskily. "Your body tells me much your words deny."

Gwen stiffened, horrified to realize she had hooked her ankles over his legs and was rubbing a slipper against one muscular calf. She pushed at his chest. "Get off me. I can't talk to you when you're squishing me."

"Forget about talking," he said roughly, lowering his head to hers.

Gwen shrank back deeper into the pillows, knowing the moment he kissed her she would be lost.

Just as his lips brushed hers, the boudoir door opened and Silvan stepped briskly in.

"*Ahem.*" Silvan cleared his throat.

Drustan's lips froze against hers. "Get out of my chamber, Da. I will handle this as I see fit," he growled.

"But you didn't tup her last eve, eh?" Silvan remarked mildly, his gaze sweeping over them. "Things look cozy to me, for being strangers and all. Aren't you forgetting something? Or should I say *someone*?' The lass told me you were in danger; the only danger I perceive is that of you botching yet another perfectly good—

"*Hand yer wheesht!*" Drustan roared. Stiffening, he pushed himself off her and sat back on his heels on the bed. "Da, you are no longer chieftain here, remember? I am. You quit. Get out." He flung an impatient hand toward the door. "Now."

"I merely came to see if Gwen required assistance," Silvan said calmly.

"She requires no assistance. She wove this web with her lies. Doona be blaming me for knotting her up in it."

"M'dear?" Silvan asked, eyeing her.

"It's all right, Silvan. You can go," she said softly. "Dageus too."

Silvan regarded her a moment more, then inclined his head and backed out of the room. When the door closed again, Drustan got off the bed and stood several paces away from her.

"What did Silvan mean by someone'?" she asked. "Botching a perfectly good what?"

He eyed her in stony silence.

She scrambled up and eyed him warily and, although she could see desire

glittering in his gaze, she could also see that he'd thought better of trying to have sex with her for the moment. She was both relieved and disappointed.

"Talk. Why have you come here, and what is your purpose?" he asked stiffly.

* * * * *

When she was seated before the fire, Drustan poured a glass of whisky and leaned back against the hearth, facing her. He took a generous swallow, studying her discreetly over the rim of his glass. He had a difficult time thinking clearly in her presence, partly because she was so damn beautiful and partly because she'd put him on the defensive with her outrageous claim the moment he'd laid eyes on her. The intensity of his attraction to her upset him more greatly even than her lie. She was the last thing he needed, right before his wedding. Walking—nay, lushly sauntering—temptation to make a fankle of things.

Initially, he'd meant merely to intimidate her by pushing her back on the bed, but then he'd touched her and she'd looped her ankles over his calves, and he'd gotten lost in the welcoming softness of her body beneath him. Had his father not interrupted, he'd like as not still be atop her. The moment he'd walked into the castle tonight, *he'd felt* the wee English within his walls. He responded fiercely to her; all it took was one glance at her to stir feelings in him he couldn't explain.

He'd told the truth when he said he couldn't get her out of his mind. Not for one moment. He knew the scent of her, had been able to recall it even while sitting amidst the smelly ale-soaked rushes in the tavern. Hers was a clean, cool, and sensual fragrance, a blend of spring rain, vanilla, and mysteries. As he'd sat in the tavern, he realized that somehow he knew she had a dimple on one side of her luscious mouth when she smiled, although he couldn't recall having seen her smile.

"Smile," he demanded.

"What?" She looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"I said smile," he growled.

She smiled weakly. Aye. Plain as day. A dimple on the left side. He sighed heavily.

His gaze drifted over her features, lingering on the witch-mark on her cheekbone, and he wondered how many others she had, in more intimate places. He'd like to search, connect the patches with his tongue, he thought, his gaze lingering on the creamy expanse of cleavage above the scooped bodice of her gown.

He shook his head impatiently. "Out with it. What's so important, English, that you lied to gain my attention this morn?"

"Gwen," she corrected absently. She was pinching her plump lower lip between her thumb and forefinger, and the gesture was making him damn uncomfortable.

Goddess of the moon, he translated silently, and she looked every inch a goddess.

"You already know my name, and since you claimed such familiarity with me, I won't stand on ceremony and insist you call me 'milord'."

Her immediate scowl made his lips twitch, but he kept his face impassive. She did not respond to his comment. Her self-control chafed him; he'd far prefer her off-balance, reacting blindly. Then *he'd* feel more in control.

She eyed him warily. "I don't know where to begin, so I ask that you hear me out completely before you start getting angry again. I know once you hear my whole story, you'll understand."

"You're going to tell me something else to upset me? What else have you left? You've already accused me of taking your maidenhead, yet you claim you doona seek to trap me into marriage. What *do* you seek?"

"Do you promise to hear me out? No interruptions until the end?"

After a moment's consideration, he conceded. Silvan had said she claimed he was in some kind of danger. What harm was there in listening? If he left the room without letting her have her say, he'd have to be on constant guard lest Silvan lock him in the garderobe so she might shout at him through the door. And until he'd cleared things up, he was quite certain he wasn't going to see a single batch of kippers and tatties from Nell. There'd been none of his thick, black exotic coffee all day either. Nay, he had to set things to rights. He enjoyed his comforts and didn't intend to suffer one more day without them. Besides, the sooner he cleared things up, the sooner he could pack her off and get her out of

his sight.

Shrugging, he gave his pledge.

She nibbled her lip, hesitating a moment. "You're in danger, Drustan—"

"Aye, I am well aware of that, though I suspect we're not referring to the same thing," he muttered darkly.

"This is serious. Your life is in danger."

He grinned faintly, gaze skimming her from head to her toes. "Och, wee one, and next you'll tell me you plan to save me, eh? Mayhap fight off my attackers yourself? Bite them in the knee?"

"Oooh. That wasn't nice. And if you're too stupid to listen to me, I'll have to," she snapped.

"Consider me warned, lass," he placated her. "I've listened, now go on with you," he said abruptly, dismissing her. "Tell Silvan I heard you out, so he'll call off his little siege. I have things to do."

At the earliest opportunity he would have Nell secure her a position in the village, far from the castle. Nay, mayhap he'd have Dageus cart her off to Edinburgh and find her work there. One way or another, he had to get the bewitching lass out of his demesne before he did something foolish and irrevocable.

Like toss her into bed and tup her until neither one of them could move. Until his muscles ached from loving her. Would she score his shoulders with her nails? he wondered. Arch her neck and make sweet mewling noises? He stiffened instantly at the thought.

He turned his back on her, hoping it might lessen whatever spell she'd cast upon him.

"Don't you even want to know what kind of danger?" she asked incredulously.

He sighed and glanced over his shoulder, one sardonic brow arched. What would it take, he wondered irritably, to make the wee lass cower? A sword at her throat?

"You said you'd hear the whole story. Was that a lie? You who claim you don't lie?"

"Fine," he said impatiently, turning back around. "Tell me all of it and have it done with."

"Maybe you should sit down," she said uneasily.

"Nay. I will stand and you will speak." He folded his arms across his chest.

"You're not making this easy."

"I doona intend to. Speak or leave. Doona waste my time."

She took a deep breath. "Okay, but I'm warning you, it's going to sound pretty far-fetched at first."

He exhaled impatiently.

"I'm from your future—"

He stifled a groan. The lass was a bampot, addled, soft in the head. Wandering about naked outside, accusing men of tuppung her, thinking she was from the future, indeed!

"—the twenty-first century, to be precise. I was hiking in the hills near Loch Ness when I fell into a cave and discovered you sleeping—"

He shook his head. "Cease this nonsense."

"You said you wouldn't interrupt." She jumped to her feet, much too close for his comfort. "It's hard enough for me to tell you this."

Drustan's eyes narrowed, and he backed up a step lest she touch him and he turn into a lustful beast again. She stood there, head tossed back. Her cheeks were flushed, her stormy eyes flashing, and she looked ready to pummel him, despite her diminutive size. She had courage, he'd give her that.

"Go on," he growled.

"I found you in the cave. You were sleeping, and funny symbols were painted on your chest. Somehow, my falling on you woke you. You were confused, you had

no idea where you were, and you helped me get out of the cave. You told me the strangest story I'd ever heard. You claimed you were from the sixteenth century, that someone had abducted and enchanted you, and you slept for nearly five centuries. You said the last thing you recalled was that someone had sent you a message to go to some glen near a loch if you wished to know who'd killed your brother. You said you went, but someone had drugged you and you started getting very tired."

"Enchanted?" Drustan shook his head in amazement. The lass had an imagination that could compete with the finest bard. But she'd made her first mistake: He didn't *have* a dead brother. He had only Dageus, who was alive and hale.

She took a deep breath and continued, undaunted by his blatant skepticism. "I didn't believe you either,

Drustan, and for that I'm sorry. You told me that if I accompanied you to *Ban Drochaid*, you would prove to me that you were telling the truth. We went to the stones, and your castle"—she swept a hand around the room—"this castle was a ruin. You took me into the circle." She deliberately omitted the intense passion they shared therein, not wishing to alienate him further. With a wistful sigh, she continued. "And you sent me here, to your castle, in your century."

Drustan blew out an exasperated breath. Aye, she was truly a madwoman, and one who knew the old rumors well. He knew the villagers loved to repeat the old tale that their ancestors had seen two entire fleets of Templars enter the walls of Castle Keltar centuries ago, never to come out again. Apparently she'd heard that those "pagan Highlanders" could open doorways and had incorporated it into her madness.

"But before I sent you back, using the stones in some pagan fashion"—he scoffed, not about to admit to such a thing—"I took your maidenhead, eh?" he said dryly. "I must confess, you've chosen a most unique way to try to trap a man into a wedding. Choose one about whom strange rumors abound. Claim he took your virginity in the future, thus, he can never argue conclusively against it." He shook his head and smiled faintly. "I give you credit for your imagination and audacity, lass."

Gwen glared at him. "For the last time, I am *not* trying to marry you, you

overbearing slack-jawed troglodyte."

"Slack-jawed—" He shook his head and blinked. "Good, because I can't. I'm betrothed," he said flatly. That would put an end to her crazed claims.

"*Betrothed?*" she echoed, stunned.

His eyes narrowed. "'Tis plain that doesn't please you. Careful lest you further betray yourself."

"But that doesn't make sense. You told me you weren't..." She trailed off, eyes wide.

Yet another hole in her story, he mused darkly. He'd been betrothed for over half a year. Near all of Alba knew of his upcoming nuptials and were, like as not, watching with bated breath to see if he actually succeeded this time. And he *would* succeed. "I am. The match was agreed upon last Yuletide. Anya Elliott is due to arrive within the fortnight for our wedding."

"Elliott?" she breathed.

"Aye, Dageus is going to fetch her and bring her here for the wedding."

Gwen turned her back to him, to conceal the shock and pain she knew must be etched all over her face. Betrothed? Her soul mate was going to marry someone else?

He'd told her Dageus had been killed coming back from the Elliott's. He'd told her that he'd been betrothed, but she'd died. But he hadn't bothered to tell her they'd both been killed at the same time!

Why? Had he loved his fiancée so much, then? Had it been too painful for him to speak of?

Her heart sank to her toes. *Not fair, not fair*, she wailed silently.

If she saved Dageus, she would be saving Drustan's future wife. The woman he wanted to marry.

Gwen drew a shaky breath, hating her choices. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. She was supposed to tell him her story, together they would

unmask the villain, get married, and live happily ever after. She'd planned it all out this afternoon, even down to the details of her medieval wedding dress. She wouldn't mind staying in the sixteenth century for him; willingly she'd forfeit her Starbucks, tampons, and hot showers. So what if she couldn't shave her legs? He had sharp daggers, and eventually she'd quit nicking herself. Yes, it might be a bit rustic, but on the other hand, what did she have to go back to?

Nothing. Not a damn thing.

Empty, lonely life.

Tears pressed at the backs of her eyes. She dropped her head, hiding behind her fringed bangs, reminding herself that she hadn't cried since she was nine and crying wouldn't help now. "This is *so* not happening," she muttered dismally.

You can't let his clan be destroyed, no matter the price, her heart said softly.

After a time she turned around and looked at him, swallowing the lump in her throat, acknowledging that there was no way she could stand by and watch him be abducted and his family be destroyed. So what that it might rip her to pieces in the process?

So much for falling in love, she thought dismally.

"Drustan," she said, striving for the calmest tone of voice she could muster, when inside she was unraveling at every seam, "in the future, the last thing you said was for me to tell the past you the whole story and to show you something. The something I was supposed to show you was my backpack, because it had things in it from my century that would have convinced you—"

"Show me this pack," he demanded.

"I can't," she said helplessly. "It disappeared."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

She bit her lip to keep from screaming with frustration. "The future you seemed to think you would be smart enough to believe me, but I'm beginning to realize the future you gave you a whole lot more credit than you deserve."

"Cease and desist with your insults, lass. You provoke the very laird upon whom

your shelter depends."

God, that was true, she realized. She *was* dependent upon him for her shelter. Although she was a smart woman, she suffered more than a few concerns about how a misplaced physicist might fend for herself in medieval Scotland. What if he *never* believed her? "I know you don't believe me, but there is something you must do, whether you believe me or not," she said desperately. "You can't let Dageus go get your fiancée yet. Please, I'm begging you, postpone the wedding."

He arched one dark brow. "Och, have out with it, lass. Ask me to marry you. I'll say nay, then you can hie yourself back whence you came."

"I am not trying to get you to postpone it so you'll marry me. I'm telling you because they're going to *die* if you don't do something. In my time, you told me Dageus was killed in a clan battle between the Montgomery and the Campbell when returning from the Elliott's. You also told me that you'd been betrothed, but that she died. I think she must have been killed coming back here with Dageus. According to you, he tried to help the Montgomery because they were outnumbered. If he interferes with that battle, they will both die. And you'd believe me then, wouldn't you? If I foretold those deaths? Don't make it cost that much. I saw you grieve—" She broke off, unable to continue.

Too many mixed emotions were crashing over her: disbelief that he wouldn't believe her, pain that he was engaged, exhaustion from the stress of the entire ordeal.

She cast him a last pleading glance, then darted into her bedchamber before she turned into the emotional equivalent of Jell-O.

After she'd slipped inside and closed the door, Drustan gazed blankly at it. Her plea for his brother had sounded so sincere that he'd gotten chills and suffered an eerie sense of disagreeable familiarity.

Her story couldn't be true, he assured himself. Many of the old tales hinted that the stones were used as gates to other places—legends never forgotten, passed down through the centuries. She'd like as not heard the gossip and, in her madness, made up a story that held a purely coincidental bit of truth. Had she faked the blood of her virginity? Mayhap she was pregnant and in desperate need of a husband...

Aye, he could travel through the stones, that much of it was true. But everything else she claimed reeked of wrongness. *If* he'd ever gotten trapped in the future he would never have behaved in such ways. He would never have sent a wee lass back through the stones. He couldn't begin to imagine the situation in which he might take a lass's maidenhead—he'd vowed never to lie with a virgin unless'twas in the marriage bed. And he would *never* have instructed her to tell his past self such a story and expected himself to believe it.

Och, thinking all this future self, past self was enough to give a man a pounding head, he thought, massaging his temples.

Nay, were he to get into such a situation, he would have simply come back himself and set things aright. Drustan MacKeltar was infinitely more capable than she'd made him out to be.

There was no point in getting unduly upset about her. His primary problem would be keeping his hands to himself, because addled or no, he desired her fiercely.

Still, he mused, mayhap he should send a full complement of guard with Dageus on the morrow. Mayhap the country wasn't as peaceful as it appeared from high atop the MacKeltar's mountain.

Shaking his head, he strode to the boudoir door and slid the bolt from his side, locking her in. Then he grabbed the key from a compartment in the headboard of his bed, left his chamber, and locked her in from the corridor as well. *Nothing* would jeopardize his wedding. Certainly not some wee lass scampering about unattended, spouting nonsense that he'd taken her virginity. She would go nowhere on the estate unaccompanied by either him or his father.

Dageus, on the other hand, he didn't plan to allow within a stone's toss of her.

He turned on his heel and stalked down the corridor.

* * * * *

Gwen curled up on the bed and cried. Sobbed, really, with hot tears and little choking noises that gave her a swollen nose and a serious sinus headache.

It was no wonder she hadn't cried since she was nine. It *hurt* to cry. She hadn't even cried when her father had threatened that if she didn't return to Triton Corp.

and finish her research, he would never speak to her again. Maybe a few of those tears leaked out now as well.

Confronting Drustan had been more awful than she'd imagined. He was *betrothed*. And by saving Dageus, she was saving Drustan's future wife. Her overactive brain busily conjured torturous images of Drustan in bed with Anya Elliott. No matter that she didn't even know what Anya Elliott looked like. It was clear from the way things were going that Anya would be Gwen's antithesis—tall and slim and leggy. And Drustan would touch and kiss tall leggy Mrs. MacKeltar the way he'd touched and kissed Gwen in the stones.

Gwen squeezed her eyes shut and groaned, but the horrid images were more vivid on the insides of her eyelids. Her eyes snapped open again. *Focus*, she told herself. *There is nothing to be gained by torturing yourself, you have a bigger problem on your hands.*

He hadn't believed her. Not a word she'd said.

How could that be? She'd done what he'd wanted her to do, told him what had happened. She'd believed telling him the whole story would make him see the logic inherent, but she was beginning to realize that sixteenth-century Drustan was not the same man that twenty-first-century Drustan had thought he was. Would the backpack have made that much of a difference? she wondered.

Yes. She could have shown him the cell phone, with its complex electronic workings. She could have shown him the magazine with the modern articles and date, her odd clothing, the waterproof fabric of her pack. She'd had rubber and plastic items in there; materials that even a medieval whatever-he-was—genius?—wouldn't have been able to dismiss without further consideration.

But the last time she'd seen the damn pack, it was spiraling off into the quantum foam.

Where do you suppose it ended up? the scientist queried, with childlike wonder.

"Oh, hush, it's not here, and that's all that really signifies," Gwen muttered aloud. She was not in the mood to think about quantum theory at the moment. She had problems, all kinds of problems.

The odds of her identifying the enemy without his help weren't promising. The

estate was vast, and Silvan had told her that, including the guards, there were seven hundred fifty men, women, and children within the walls, and another thousand crofters scattered about. Not to mention the nearby village... It could be anyone: a distant clan, an angry woman, a conquering neighbor. She had at most a month, and as recalcitrant as he was—not even willing to admit he could travel through the stones—she certainly couldn't expect him to be forthcoming with other information.

Woodenly, she undressed and crawled beneath the covers. Tomorrow was another day. Eventually she'd get through to him somehow, and if she couldn't, she'd just have to save the MacKeltar clan all by herself.

And then what will you do? her heart demanded. Catch the bouquet at his freaking wedding? Hire on as their nanny?

Grrr...

* * * * *

"Well?" Silvan demanded, strolling into the Greathall. "Does she still claim you took her maidenhead?"

Drustan leaned back in his chair. He quaffed the remains of his whisky and rolled the glass between his palms. He'd been *gazing* into the fire, thinking of his future wife, trying to keep his mind off the temptress in the chamber that adjoined his. As the spirits had slid into his belly, his worries had eased a bit and he'd begun to see dark humor in the situation. "Oh, aye. She even has a reason why I remain blissfully unaware of my breach of honor. 'Twould seem I tupp'd her in my future."

Silvan blinked. "Come again?"

"I tupp'd her five hundred years from now," Drustan said. "And then I sent her back to save me." He couldn't hold it in any longer. He tossed his head back and laughed.

Silvan eyed him strangely. "How does she claim you came to be in the future?"

"I was enchanted," Drustan said, shoulders shaking with mirth. It really was quite amusing, now that he reflected upon it. Since he wasn't currently looking at her, he wasn't worried that he might lose control of his lust and could see the

humor more easily.

Silvan stroked his chin, his gaze intent. "So she claims she woke you and you sent her back?"

"Aye. To save me from being enchanted in the first place. She also mumbled some nonsense about you and Dageus being in danger."

Silvan dosed his eyes and rubbed his index finger in the crease between his brows, a thing he did often when thinking deeply. "Drustan, you must keep an open mind. " 'Tis not entirely impossible on the face of it," he said slowly.

Drustan sobered swiftly. "Nay—on the face of it, it's not," he agreed. " 'Tis once you get into the details that you realize she's a wee bampot with little grasp on sanity."

"I admit it's far-fetched, but—"

"Da, I'm not going to repeat all the nonsense she spouted, but I assure you, the lass's story is so full of holes that were it a ship, 'twould be kissing the sandy bed of the ocean."

Silvan frowned consideringly. "I scarce see how it could hurt to take precautions. Mayhap you should pass some time with her. See what else you might learn about her."

"Aye," Drustan agreed. "I thought to take her to Balanoch on the morrow, see if anyone recognizes her and can tell us where to find her kin."

Silvan nodded. "I will bide a wee with her myself, study her for signs of madness." He cast Drustan a stern look. "I saw the way you looked at her and know that, despite your misgivings, you desire her. If she's daft as you say, I won't abide her being taken advantage of. You must keep her out of your bed. You have your future wife to think of."

"I know," Drustan snapped, all trace of amusement vanishing.

"We need to rebuild the line, Drustan."

"I know," he snapped again.

"Just so you know where your duties lie," Silvan said mildly. "Not betwixt an addlepate's thighs."

"I *know*," Drustan growled.

"On the other hand, if she weren't daft—" Silvan began, but stopped and sighed when Drustan stomped from the room.

Silvan sat in pensive silence after his son had gone. Her story was nigh impossible to believe. How was one to countenance someone knocking upon one's door, claiming to have spent time with one in one's future?

The mind summarily rejected it—it was too chafing a concept for even a Druid to wrap his mind about. Still, Silvan had swiftly run through a few complex calculations, and the possibility existed. It was a minuscule possibility, but a good Druid knew it was dangerous to ignore *any* possibility.

If her story were true, his son had cared for the lass so much that he'd taken her maidenhead. If her story were true, she knew Drustan had powers beyond most mortal men and had cared for him enough to both give him her virginity and come back to save him.

He wondered how much Gwen Cassidy truly knew about Drustan. He would speak with Nell and have her casually mention a few things, observe the lass's reaction. Nell was a fine judge of character. He would spend time with her himself as well, not to question her—for words were without merit, lies easy to fabricate—but to study the workings of her mind as he would study an apprentice. Between the two of them, they would discern the truth. Drustan was clearly not demonstrating a levelheaded response toward the lass.

His eldest son could be so stubborn sometimes. After three failed betrothals, he was so blinded by doubts about himself, so hell-bent on wedding, that he was unwilling to entertain anything that might seem to threaten his upcoming nuptials. He was going to marry, and tarry not in the process.

Although Silvan knew they needed to rebuild the Keltar line, he suspected marriage between Drustan and the Elliott lass would entail a lifetime of deception that would inevitably result in misery for both of them.

A wee bampot, was she, this Gwen Cassidy? Silvan wasn't so certain about that.

Chapter 16

Besseta Alexander fumbled above the mantel for her yew sticks, dread coiling like a venomous snake in the pit of her stomach. A deeply superstitious woman, her charms were as necessary to her as the air she breathed. Of late she'd taken to scrying daily, frantic to discover what threat was moving ever nearer her son.

When she and Nevin had first moved to Castle Keltar, she'd been thrilled to return to the Highlands. No flat-lander was she; she'd ached for many years to return to the misty caps, shimmery lochs, and heathery moors of her youth. The Highlands were closer to the heavens, even the moon and stars seemed within reach atop the mountains.

Nevin's post was a prime one, priest to an ancient and wealthy clan. Here he could live out his life in security and contentment, with no risk of the kind of battles in which she'd lost her other sons, for the MacKeltar housed the second-finest garrison in all of Alba, second only to the King.

Aye, for the first fortnight she'd been elated. But then, shortly after their arrival, she'd cast her yew sticks and seen a dark cloud on her horizon rolling inexorably nearer. Try as she might, she'd been unable to coax her sticks *or* her runes *or* her tea leaves to tell her more.

Just a darkness. A darkness that threatened her only remaining son.

And then, the last time she'd read them, the darkness had extended to one of Silvan's sons, but she'd been unable to determine which one.

Sometimes she felt that great sucking darkness was reaching for *her*, trying to drag her into it. She would sit for hours, clutching her ancient runes, tracing their shapes, rocking back and forth until the panic eased. Vague fear had been her lifelong companion, even as a small lass. She dare not lose Nevin, lest those shadows gain substance and tear at her with wicked claws.

Sighing, she smoothed her hair with trembling fingers, then cast the sticks upon the table. Had she cast them with Nevin in the hut, she would have gotten yet another tedious lecture about God and His mysterious ways.

Thank you very much, lad, but I trust my sticks, not your invisible God who refuses to answer me when I ask Him why He gets four of my sons and I get only one.

Studying the design, the coil in her belly tightened. Her sticks had fallen in the identical pattern they'd formed last week. Danger—but she had no way of knowing from what quarter. How was she to prevent it if she knew not whence it came? She *dare* not fail with her fifth and final son. Alone, that hungry blackness would get her, carry her off into what must surely be the oblivion of hell.

"Tell me more," she beseeched. "I can't do anything until I know which lad presents the danger to my son."

Despairing, she gathered them, then suddenly changed her mind and did something a good fortuneteller rarely risked lest evil forces, ever attuned to fear and despair, cunningly ply a false design upon the limbs. She cast them again, a second time, in quick succession to the first.

Fortunately, the fates were inclined to be gentle and generous, for when the sticks clattered upon the table, she was granted a vision—a thing that had happened only once before in her life. Etched in her mind's eye, she clearly saw the eldest MacKeltar lad—Drustan—scowling, she heard the sound of a woman weeping, and she saw her son, blood dripping from his lips. Somewhere in the vision she sensed a fourth person but couldn't bring that person's face into focus.

After a moment, she decided the fourth person must not be relevant to Nevin's danger since she couldn't see him or her. Mayhap an innocent onlooker.

The woman weeping must be the woman her sticks had told her would kill her son—the lady that Drustan MacKeltar would wed. She squeezed her eyes shut but could glimpse only a wee form and golden hair, not a woman she'd e'er seen before.

The vision faded, leaving her shaking and drained.

She had to somehow put a stop to things before Drustan MacKeltar wed.

She knew he was betrothed—all of Alba knew he was betrothed for the fourth time—but Nevin was infuriatingly closemouthed about the occupants of Castle

Keltar. She had no idea when the wedding was to be, or even when the bride would be arriving.

Of late, the more she pried for news from her son, the more recalcitrant he became. He was hiding things from her, and that frightened her. When they'd first arrived, he'd spoken freely about the castle and its occupants; now it was rare for him to mention anything about his days at the castle but for tedious details concerning his work on the chapels.

The Alexander's hut nestled in a valley on the outskirts of Balanoch, nearly twenty furlongs from the castle proper. Nevin, overseeing the renovation of two chapels on the estate, walked each day, but such a tiring journey was beyond her aching joints and swollen limbs. Walking to Balanoch, a furlong to the south, was possible, and on good days she could manage five or more, but twenty and back again were impossible.

If she couldn't wheedle the information from her son, mayhap, if the weather held, she could walk to the village.

Nevin was all she had left, and no one—not the MacKeltar, not the church, nay, not even God—was taking her last son away.

* * * * *

"Here, horse, horse, horse," Gwen cooed.

The creature in question peeled back its lips, showing frightfully large teeth, and she hastily retracted her hand. Ears flattened, tail swishing, it regarded her balefully.

Ten minutes ago the groom had brought two horses out of the stable and tied them loosely to a post near the door. Drustan had led the largest one off without a backward glance, leaving her alone with the other. It had taken every bit of her nerve to trudge up to it, and there she stood near the door of the stables, trying to woo the infernal thing.

Mortified, she glanced over her shoulder, but Drustan was several yards away, conversing with the stable master. At least he wasn't watching her make a fool of herself. She was city born and raised, by God. How was she supposed to know what to do with a thousand pounds of muscle, hair, and teeth?

She tried again, this time with no tempting appendage proffered, merely a sweet murmur, but the obstinate creature nonchalantly lifted its tail and a warm stream hissed on the ground.

Hastily snatching her slippered foot from the line of fire, she arched a brow, nostrils flaring. So much for thinking this day was going to be better than last night.

It had begun with promise. A half dozen maids had toted up a steaming bath and she'd gratefully soaked her still-tender-from-lovemaking body. Then Nell had brought breakfast and coffee to her chamber. Fueled by caffeine-induced optimism after gulping the dark, delicious brew, she'd dressed and strolled off to find Drustan, to continue her efforts to convince him of the danger he was in. But the moment she'd walked into the Greathall, Drustan had informed her they were going to the village. On horses.

Gwen cast a dubious glance at the beast. She'd never met a horse in person, and now she was supposed to entrust her small self to that monstrous, muscular, haughty creature? It reminded her of Drustan in both stature and demeanor. And it didn't like her any more than she trusted it.

Oh, the horse was beautiful, and at first she'd admired its lovely doelike eyes and silky nose, but it also had sharp hooves, big teeth, and a tail that—*ouch!* Kept flicking her across the rump every time she got too close.

"Here, horse, horse, horse," she muttered, tentatively extending her hand again. She held her breath as the horse made a soft whinnying sound and nudged its nose toward her fingers. At the last minute her resolve slipped and, envisioning strong white teeth neatly nipping her fingers off, she fisted her hand, and the horse, of course, turned away and flattened its ears again.

Swish!

Behind her, Drustan watched with amazement.

"Have you never seen a horse before, lass? They doona answer to 'horse.' They have no idea they are horses. 'Tis like sauntering into the forest, saying, 'Here, boar, boar, boar. I should like to roast you for dinner'."

She shot a startled, embarrassed look over her shoulder. "Of *course* I've seen a

horse before." Her brows puckered and she added sheepishly, "In a book. And don't get all cocky on me; you should have seen your face when you saw a car for the first time."

"A car?"

"In my time we have... wagons that need no horses to pull them."

He scoffed and dismissed her statement completely. "So you've never ridden a horse," he remarked dryly, tossing himself up into his saddle. It was a lovely motion, full of casual grace, supreme confidence, and male power to the Nth degree.

It made her downright irritable. "Show-off."

He tossed her a lazy grin. "Although I've not heard that before, 'twould seem you weren't complimenting me."

"It means arrogant and smug, flaunting your skill."

"One must work with what one has." His eyes lingered on her lips, then dropped to her breasts, before he dragged his gaze away.

"I saw that. Don't look at me like that. You're betrothed," she said stiffly, resenting Anya Elliott dear down to the marrow in her bones.

"Och, but I'm not yet wed," he muttered, looking at her from beneath his brows.

"*That* is a despicable attitude."

He shrugged. "'Tis the way of men." He wasn't about to discuss his true beliefs on the issue with her. His true beliefs were one reason why his attraction to her disturbed him so much. He'd far prefer to be chaste for at least a few weeks before his wedding, and once wed would not stray. Yet she was an irresistible temptation.

But he was strong. He would resist her. To prove it, he smiled down at her.

What was his deal today? Gwen wondered suspiciously. She knew he hadn't decided to believe her—she'd overheard him talking with Dageus before he'd seen her entering the hall. He'd said he was taking her to the village to see if

anyone recognized her.

"I can walk," she announced.

"It's a day's walk," he lied, and shrugged again. "But if you wish to walk twenty furlongs..." Without further ado, he turned his mount and slowly started off. She trailed along behind him, muttering under her breath.

Ha, he thought she didn't know what a furlong was, but she knew all kinds of measurements. A furlong was roughly an eighth of a mile, which meant the village was approximately two and a half miles, and while it certainly wouldn't take her all day, there was her predisposition toward inertia to consider.

He stopped and tossed her a look that said *last chance*. Shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand against her brow, she scowled up at him. Again, he wore leather trews, that cased his powerful thighs, a linen shirt, his leather bands, and leather boots. There was just something irresistible about a well-muscled man in leather. His dark hair spilled unbound over his shoulders, and as she gazed at him he gave that achingly familiar lionlike toss of his mane, and her hormones roared in response. She refused to think about what she knew lay in his snug leather trews. Knew from personal experience. Because she'd had her hand wrapped around it. Because she'd like to wrap her lips around it...

She tucked her bangs behind her ear with a dismal sigh.

When he nudged his mount near, she skittered back.

A corner of his lip rose in a mocking smile. "So there *are* some things you fear, Gwen Cassidy."

She narrowed her eyes. "There's a difference between fear and lack of familiarity. Anything one does for the first time can be daunting. I have no experience with horses, therefore I have not yet developed proper responses. *Yet* is the significant word there."

"Then come, O brave one." He extended his hand. "'Tis apparent you won't be able to ride on your own. If you doona ride with me, you'll have to walk. Behind me," he added, just to irritate her.

Her hand shot up toward his.

With a snort of amusement, he clamped his fingers about her wrist and lifted her, deftly sliding her into position on the saddle in front of him. "Easy," he murmured to his mount. Or was it to her? She wasn't sure which of them was more skittish.

He adjusted her lightweight cloak and encircled her waist with his arms. Gwen closed her eyes as a wave of longing flooded her. He was touching her. All over. His chest was pressed against her back, his arms around her to guide the tethers, his thighs pressing against hers. She was in heaven. The only thing that could make it better would be for him to remember her, to know her and look at her the same way he had their last night together in the circle of stones.

Was it possible that the memory was somewhere in him and, if she only found the right words, he would recall? On a cellular level, wouldn't he *have* to possess the knowledge? Perhaps deeply buried, forgotten and ethereal as a misty dream?

She silently savored the contact, then realized that neither he nor the horse was moving. His breath was warm, fanning the nape of her neck. It took all her will not to shift in the saddle and plant a deep, wet kiss on those lips that were only a turn of her head away.

"Well? Don't we move forward or something?" she asked. If they stayed still, touching like this, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. Some of his silky hair had fallen forward over her shoulder, and she fisted her fingers to prevent them from reaching up and caressing it. What was he doing back there? It wouldn't do her any good to start fantasizing about him. This Drustan was a month younger than hers and a *lifetime* short of a lick of common sense. He was taking her to Balanoch to see if anyone recognized her, the dolt!

"Aye," he said hoarsely. His thighs tensed and he spurred the horse into motion.

Gwen nearly lost her breath as the animal moved beneath her. It was frightening. It was *dizzying*. It was exhilarating. Mane ruffling in the breeze, the horse made occasional soft horsey grunts as it galloped over the emerald and heather-filled field.

It was an incredible experience. In her mind's eye, she envisioned herself bent low over its back, soaring through the meadows and hills. She'd always wanted to learn to ride, but her parents had dictated her strenuous educational

curriculum, and it had permitted no outside activities. The Cassidys were thinkers, not doers.

There was one more way she could distance herself from them, she decided. She could become a doer, and think as little as possible.

"I would like to learn to ride," she informed him over her shoulder. She was going to be there awhile, after all, and it certainly couldn't hurt to acquire some medieval skills. She couldn't bear being without the freedom of transportation. In her century, when her car was in the shop, she felt trapped. She suspected it would be wise to gain all the independence she could. What if he *never* believed her? Married his bimbo and refused to return her to her own time? Panic flooded her at that thought. She definitely needed some basic skills.

"Mayhap the stable master can fit you into his schedule," he said against her ear. "But I hear tell he makes his apprentices shovel out the stables."

She shivered. Had his lips brushed it deliberately, or had the horse's gait pressed him suddenly forward?

"Perhaps Dageus could teach me," she countered waspishly.

"I doona think Dageus will be teaching you a blethering thing," he said in a dangerous voice, and that time his lips did brush her ear. "And I bid you keep your lips off my brother, lest I confine you to your chambers."

What game was he playing? Had that been jealousy lacing his deep brogue, or wishful thinking on her part?

"Besides, as long as you fear the horse, he can sense it and will not respond well. You must respect him, not fear him. Horses are sensitive, intelligent creatures, full of spirit."

"Kind of like me, huh?" she said cheekily.

He made a sound of strangled laughter. "Nay. Horses do as they're told. I doubt you ever do. And you certainly have a lofty opinion of yourself, doona you?"

"No more so than you."

"I see spirit in you, lass, but you demonstrate naught else, and so long as you

continue to lie to me, respect will never be part of it. Why not tell the truth?"

"Because I already did," she snapped. "And if you don't believe me, then why don't you take me *back* through the stones?" Gwen suggested, inspired by a sudden thought. If he would only take a short one-day jaunt into the future, she could show him her world, her cars, show him where she'd found him. Why hadn't she thought of that last night?

"Nay," he said instantly. "The stones may *never* be used for personal reasons. 'Tis forbidden."

"Ha! You just admitted that you *can* use them," she pounced.

Drustan growled near her ear.

"Besides, for what other reasons would you use them? On some secret mission?" she scoffed. "And it wouldn't be personal reasons; it would be to save your clan," she added. "I think that's important enough to merit using them."

"Enough, lass. I will not continue this discussion."

"But—"

"Enough. No more buts. And quit squirming."

They rode the rest of the way to the village in silence.

* * * * *

Balanoach, although they called it "the village," was in truth a thriving city. Drustan believed a more prosperous and peaceful city had never existed, and those who resided in Balanoach kept quiet about it when they traveled, to preserve the serenity of their Highland home.

The Keltar-Druids kept a careful watch over Balanoach, performing the ancient rituals to ensure fertility of clan and crop. They'd also placed strategic formations, known as *wards*, about the countryside, which worked to dissuade the curious traveler from venturing too far up the mountain.

It was their city; they would always nurture and protect it.

Aye, he thought, his gaze skimming the thatched rooftops, it was a lovely

village. Centuries ago, hundreds had settled in the rich vale protected by the Keltar. Over the centuries, hundreds had become thousands. Far enough away that they had few visitors, yet near enough to the sea to trade, Balanoch housed four Kirks, two mills, chandlers, tanners, weavers, tailors, potters, blacksmiths, an armorer, shoemakers, and sundry other craftsmen.

It was to the goldsmith they were going first, so Drustan could check on the intricate gold leaf with which the talented craftsman was embellishing one of Silvan's treasured tomes.

As they entered the outskirts of the village, Drustan observed Gwen as dispassionately as possible, which was difficult with her squarely between his thighs. He'd dreaded placing her upon his horse, but there'd simply been no other alternative. It was clear the lass had never sat a horse before.

Schooling his lustful thoughts, he studied her. She craned her neck this way and that, drinking in the sights.

They rode past the tanner's and butcher's stalls, whose shops were at the perimeter of the city, where the odor from the dung used to soften the hides might more readily dissipate and the drippings from freshly butchered meat could be safely drained. On avenues further in were the sweltering ovens of the blacksmiths, set apart from the gentler merchants so the din of metal against metal would not interfere with quiet business.

The houses and shops, constructed of stone with thatched roofs and broad shuttered faces, opened to the street. The main thoroughfare housed the chandlers, clothiers, weavers, shoemakers, and such. The top shutters, which opened horizontally, were raised and propped up with poles to form an awning, while the bottom shutter lowered, and wares were laid out in enticing displays. The village had its own council that strictly enforced codes set by the Keltar, whereby they regulated trade, sanitation, and other matters of craftsmanship.

She was curious as if she'd not seen such a city before, Drustan thought, as she tried to peer in every direction at once. The moment they'd entered the town, she began firing questions. The smiths, hammering red-hot steel, sparks flying, fascinated her. She gawked at a young apprentice making wire by drawing hot metal through a template hole with pincers.

The butcher made her queasy, and she refused his offer of a strip of salted venison. As they passed the tanner, she saw steam rising from several shallow vats and bid him pause so she could watch the merchant shave a skin with a two-handled currier's knife.

His eyes narrowed. She was the most convincing little actress he'd ever encountered. Her madness seemed a sporadic thing, manifesting itself infrequently, albeit spectacularly. So long as she wasn't talking of being from the future or making wild claims about him, she seemed merely unusual, not crazed.

When she leaned back and pressed a hand against his leather-clad thigh, every muscle in his body contracted and his leg went rigid beneath her palm. He closed his eyes, telling himself it was but a hand, an appendage, absolutely nothing to drive him to senseless arousal, but lust had been thundering through his veins since he'd placed her on the horse. The warmth of her wee, generously curved body between his thighs had kept him in a permanent state of arousal. When she was near, his mind slackened, his body stiffened, and he became useless but for one thing.

Bed play.

He'd like to wrap his fists in the fabric of her gown and rip it down the front, baring all those rosy curves for his pleasure. She made him feel primitive as his ancient ancestors who'd taken women as barbarically and unapologetically as they'd conquered kingdoms. For a brief moment he was flooded with the strange idea that he had every *right* to take her to his bed.

He'd bet she'd not protest o'ermuch either, he thought darkly. If at all.

"Did he make your... er, trews?" She gestured toward the tanner.

"Aye," he said roughly, pushing her hand away.

"Forgive me for touching your glorious personage," she said stiffly. "I just wondered if your trews were as soft as they looked."

He bit his lip to prevent a smile. Glorious personage, indeed. Where did she come up with her words? *My trews may be soft, lass*, he thought, *but what's in them isn't*. Had her hand crept a bit higher, she would have found that out for herself.

"Might I get a pair?"

"Of leather trews?" he said indignantly.

She turned her head to look at him, and it put her lips a breath from his. His heart beat erratically and he went motionless so he might not do something abjectly stupid, like taste those luscious lying lips.

"They look comfortable, Drustan," she said. "I'm not used to wearing dresses."

His gaze seemed to have gotten stuck on her lips, and he scarce heard her reply. Such lips as only a witch would have—hot and succulent, moist and utterly kissable. Slightly parted, revealing straight white teeth and the tip of a pink tongue. For a moment, he watched her lips moving but couldn't hear a word she said. It took a vicious shake of his head to make her voice fade back in.

"And I always wanted a pair, but in my house—*ha!*—my parents would have *killed* me if I'd ever worn a pair of black leather pants."

"As well they should, were their daughter to don such trews." Were he to glimpse her generously rounded bottom cased in snug-fitting black leather trews, he might just forget who he was and that he was getting married anon.

"Please? Just one pair. Aw, come on. What harm could it do?"

He blinked. For the first time since he'd met her, she sounded like a normal woman, but she wasn't begging for a pretty gown, the contrary wench wanted men's attire.

"Where's your sense of adventure?" she pressed.

Focused on your lips, he thought irritably, *with all my other damned senses*.

An image of her clad in black leather trews and nothing else, golden hair spilling in wild disarray over her generous naked breasts, loomed in his mind.

"Absolutely not," he growled, spurring his horse forward and nodding farewell to the tanner. "And turn around. Doona look at me."

"*Oooh*. Now I'm not even allowed to look at you?" She snorted and sulked all the way to the goldsmith's, but he noticed that it didn't curb her curiosity. Nay, it merely meant she poked that luscious lower lip of hers out further, making him

shift uncomfortably in the saddle.

When at last they arrived at the goldsmith's, he vaulted from the horse, desperate to put distance between them. He was about to knock on the door when she cleared her throat imperiously.

He glanced warily back at her.

"Aren't you going to get me off this thing?" she said sweetly.

Too sweetly, he realized. She was up to something. She was a vision, clad in one of his mother's cloaks of pale mauve, her shimmering gold hair spilling over her shoulders, her eyes bright.

"Jump," he said stiffly.

She narrowed her eyes. "You haven't had many girlfriends, have you? Get over here and help me. This beast is taller than I am. I could break an ankle. And then you'd be stuck carrying me around for God only knows how long."

Girlfriends? He puzzled over the word for a moment, breaking it into its base parts and analyzing it. Ah, she meant liaisons. Sighing, he calculated the odds that she might remain quietly mounted and give him some peace, then recalled his purpose in bringing her here. He wanted the villagers to see her, in hopes that someone would recognize her. He was certain she must have stopped in the village before walking to his castle. The sooner someone recognized her, the sooner he could put an end to her presence in his keep.

He was going to have to remove her from the horse, for wee as she was, she would indeed hurt herself jumping, and then there would be hell to pay with Silvan.

You made her jump from the horse? Silvan would exclaim.

I had to. I was afraid if I touched her, I wouldn't be able to stop touching her. Aye, that would go over well. His da would be wildly amused. He'd tell Dageus and they would laugh uproariously. He'd never live it down. Drustan MacKeltar, afraid to touch a wee wench who scarce reached his ribs. He prayed his future wife provoked similar feelings of desire in him.

"Come." He reluctantly raised his hands.

She brightened instantly, slid off the horse, and hopped into his arms.

She hit him with enough impact that it caused his breath to leave his lungs in a soft whoosh of air and forced him to wrap his arms around her to keep her from falling.

Her hair was in his face and smelled like the heather-scented soap Nell made in the kitchens. Her breasts were soft, crushed mounds against his chest, and her legs were sort of—nay, no sort of about it—they were wrapped around him.

No wonder Dageus hadn't resisted. It was a wonder his brother hadn't tugged the lass right then and there.

The muscles in his arms defied his brain's command to release her. Perversely, they tightened around her.

"Drustan?" Her voice was soft, her breath sweet, her body womanly and supple against his.

It was futile, he thought darkly. He shifted her abruptly so that her lips were accessible and did what he'd been longing to do since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. He kissed her. Punishingly. In his mind he was erasing Dageus's kiss from her lips, wiping the slate clean, imprinting himself and only himself upon her.

The moment their lips met, a frantic energy sizzled the length and breadth of his body the likes of which he'd never felt in his life.

And she kissed him back wildly. Her wee hands sank into his hair, her nails grazing his scalp. Her legs tightened shamelessly around his waist, capturing the hardness of him snugly against her woman's heat. Hers was a hotter kiss, and more carnal in nature, than aught he'd ever received.

He responded like a man starved for the touch of a woman. He cupped his hands beneath her luscious bottom, sliding the fabric of her skirt away from her legs. He kissed and kissed and kissed her, clamping her head firmly between his hands, nibbling and suckling and tasting her hot, lying mouth, wondering how it could be so sweet. Shouldn't a lying tongue taste bitter? Not like honey and

cinnamon.

An image, startling in its clarity and strangeness, flashed through his mind: this woman, clad in strange garments—half a chemise and ruined trews—regarding him in a silvered glass as he struggled with a faded and dingy blue pair of trews.

He'd ne'er worn such trews in his life.

Yet his lust for her trebled at the onslaught of the image. Plunging his tongue into her mouth, he pressed his lower body against her and pulled her more tightly against his hard shaft. His wits were drugged by the scent of her, the taste of her, the raw mating heat of her.

"Milord?" a faint, startled voice said behind him.

Irritation flickered through his veins that someone dared interrupt. By Amergin, it was his choice if he chose to hang himself! This woman had placed herself in his castle, in his arms. He wasn't married *yet!*

There was the sound of a throat being cleared, then a gentle laugh.

He closed his eyes, drew upon his Druid discipline, and thrust her away, but the wee witch sucked his lower lip as she went, causing his desire to peak feverishly. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips deliciously swollen.

And he was hard as a rock.

Disgusted with himself, he pasted a smile on his face, adjusted his sporran about his waist, and turned to greet the man who'd saved him from tugging the lass in the street without a thought for his betrothed.

"Tomas," he hailed the elderly, gray-haired goldsmith. He tugged Gwen forward by the hand and thrust her beneath the smith's nose, watching intently for any flicker of recognition. There was none.

The smith merely beamed, his gaze darting between the two of them. "Silvan must be delighted, just delighted," he exclaimed. "He's been longing for grandchildren and he's finally goin' to get his wedding. I saw the two of ye out the window and simply had to come see for meself. Welcome, milady!"

As Tomas turned a beatific gaze on Gwen, Drustan realized the smith was

laboring under the mistaken assumption that Gwen was his latest betrothed.

Drustan damped his teeth around the introduction he'd been about to make, not about to disabuse him of the notion. The last thing he needed was more rumors circulating in the village that Anya might one day overhear. Perhaps Tomas would simply forget what he'd seen or, after meeting the true bride, wisely keep his own counsel. The less said about it the better.

"I vow, in all my life I've ne'er seen Drustan MacKeltar escort a lass about town. He's of a certain ne'er stood and kissed one in the street for all to see. Och, but where are me wits? Addled by seein' the laird in love, they be," he said, bowing hastily. "Bidding ye welcome again, and please, do come in."

Gwen cast Drustan an arch, heated glance that seared him to the bone, before following Tomas into the shop.

He remained outside a few moments, taking longer than necessary to secure his horse, breathing deeply of the crisp, cool air. *In love, my arse*, he thought darkly. *I've been bewitched.*

Chapter 17

Gwen was ecstatic. He'd kissed her. Kissed her just like he'd kissed her in her century, and she'd glimpsed *her* Drustan in his eyes. And the smith had thought they looked to be in love!

There was hope, after all. In her century, he'd claimed he wouldn't kiss a woman were he betrothed or wed. Well, she thought cheerily, he'd just broken that rule. Perhaps if she dug deep enough, reminded him of things they'd done in her time, he would somehow remember it all, given time. She'd save him and he'd break his engagement and marry *her*, she thought dreamily.

Resisting the urge to fan herself, she glanced about Tomas's cottage. Drustan was outside fiddling with the horse, but she knew that wasn't the only reason he'd remained outside. He had responded exactly as he had in her century, and she knew Drustan was a man of strong passion. He didn't like to stop once he got started.

She hoped he was damn uncomfortable in those comfy-looking snug leather trews he'd refused to buy for her.

It was possible that delight colored her impression of the tiny sixteenth-century cottage, but she found it lovely. It was cozy and warm, filled with a light floral scent, probably from all those herb thingies hanging upside down in the windows, she decided. A dazzling array of exquisite silver work, plates and goblets, beautifully lettered gold paternosters and religious tableaux were scattered about on tables and shelves. An illuminated manuscript lay on a long, narrow table, surrounded by half a dozen wax candles placed at a cautious distance. There were no oil globes in the room, only candles, and when she inquired, Tomas explained that the oil caused a residue when burned that was more damaging to his manuscripts and gold work than the fine candles he purchased. Indeed, he burned only certain types of wood in his hearth, to minimize the soot. His craft was so detailed and so well-loved by the laird of the MacKeltar, he'd explained, that Silvan himself had paid to have the costly glass windows installed so that he might work by brightest daylight.

"This is for Silvan," he said, beckoning her over to see the tome, eager to display his craft.

"It's lovely," she exclaimed, lifting the embossed cover with the devout care of a bookworm. The pages looked ancient and were written in yet another unintelligible language, with all kinds of symbols that danced just beyond her comprehension. The edges had been painstakingly gold-leafed, with delicate Celtic knot-work. She peered at Tomas. "What is this... er, tome about?"

Tomas shrugged. "Verily, I have no idea. Silvan's tomes are oft in unusual tongues."

Just then, Drustan swept into the cottage on a gust of warm, heather-scented air and closed the door with a bang. "Have you finished with it?" he said abruptly, eager to get on to the next stop to see if he could locate someone who recognized her.

Tomas shook his head. "Nay. It will take a few days more. But here's the other volume Silvan wanted. I dinna mind telling ye it took me nigh upon a year to get me hands on a legible copy."

When he offered the slim volume to Drustan, Gwen reacted instinctively and plucked it from his hand. "Oh, God," she breathed, staring at it.

She was holding a copy of Claudius Ptolemy's geocentric view of the universe, which had proposed that the sun and planets orbited the earth and would not be decisively argued in published form until 1543, with Copernicus's *On the Revolution of Heavenly Orbs*. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. It was all she could do not to *pet* the sixteenth-century copy.

"I'll take that," Drustan snapped, taking it from her hands.

She blinked at him, too astonished to protest. She'd had a sixteenth-century edition of Ptolemy's work in her hands, touching her skin.

"I'll stop by in a fortnight for the other tome," Drustan told Tomas. "Come," he said to Gwen.

Bidding Tomas farewell, Gwen pondered the significance of that volume. Drustan MacKeltar—sixteenth-century cosmologist? *What a hoot*, she thought. She'd tried so hard to turn her back on physics, but when her heart finally decided to get involved, it was with a man who studied planets and mathematics.

He was really going to have to start trusting her. They had so much to talk about, if he'd only trust her.

* * * * *

Gwen sighed as they entered the Greathall. She'd greeted the day with optimism, only to end it in defeat. She'd accomplished no more than she had last night, and she finally realized that although he was being courteous, he found her story amusing, nothing more. Three times he'd made reference to her "weakness of wit." He thought she was crazy, she realized sadly. And she began to see that the more she spoke of the future, the crazier he would think her.

Tirelessly, he'd dragged her from merchant's shop to stall, making certain everyone in the village saw her, toting her about until she was suffering medieval overload. Not once had he touched her again—in fact, he'd hardly even looked at her.

It had been an exhilarating and fascinating foray into the past, with scents and sights that had left her gaping on more than one occasion. But not once had he permitted her to steer the conversation to the issue that was most important: that he would be abducted and his clan destroyed in approximately a month.

Each time she brought it up, he'd shoved her into yet another booth or wandered off into the throng to greet someone.

On the ride back to the castle, he'd been so tense behind her that she'd finally leaned forward as far as she could and clutched the black's mane. She'd given up and simply reveled in the beauty of the sunset as it had tinted the heathery fields a deep violet. She'd glimpsed a mischievous pine marten darting about the meadow, pausing to stand with its furry little paws upon a stump, nose questioning the breeze. A luminous snowy owl had hooted softly in the branches of the forest beyond. The steady hum of frogs and crickets had filled the air with song.

Full night had fallen by the time they entered the open gates of the castle.

Don't you ever close the gates? she'd asked, frowning. The barbican, constructed of massive stones, sported a formidable portcullis that looked as if it hadn't been lowered in a century. The gate itself was fashioned of wood three feet thick and shod with steel.

And standing wide open.

Not *one* guard sat the barbican.

He'd laughed, the epitome of arrogant male. *Nay*, he'd replied easily. Not *only do the Keltar house the largest garrison beside the king's, there's been naught but peace in these mountains for years.*

Well, perhaps you should, she'd said worriedly. *Just anyone could wander in.*

Just anyone has, he'd replied with a pointed look. *The only thing within leagues of my demesne that fashes me currently rests astride my horse.*

"I am not a threat to you," she said, picking up the thread of the conversation where it had left off a few moments ago. "Why can't you simply consider what I've told you? You saw for yourself that no one knew me in Balanoch. For heaven's sake, if it looks like a skunk and smells like a skunk, it probably *is* a skunk," she said, exasperated.

Drustan unsheathed his sword, propped it by the door, and glanced at her with a perplexed expression. "A skunk?"

"A mammal, weasel family, one of those smelly—okay, so that probably wasn't the best metaphor." She shrugged. "What I meant was, be logical. If you simply listen and ask the right questions, you'll find that my story makes sense."

He said nothing, and she heaved another sigh. "I give up. I don't care if you believe me, if you'll just promise me two things."

"My hand in marriage is already given, lass."

Gwen dosed her eyes and sighed. "Don't let Dageus go to the Elliott's."

"Tis too late. He rode out this morn shortly after we did."

Gwen eyes flew back open. "You must go after him," she cried.

"Doona fash yourself, lass. I sent a full complement of guard with him—"

"What if that's not enough? I don't know how big the battle was!"

"He rides with over two hundred of the finest fighting men Alba boasts. No

trivial battle between clan will have such numbers. A clan dispute is usually naught more than a score or two of angry brothers and kin-folk."

Gwen eyed him. "Are you sure that it might not be a bigger battle?" He *did* know his century. Somehow, she'd gotten the idea that medieval battles were all as grand as she'd seen in *Braveheart*. Probably from watching *Brave-heart*.

"The Campbell and Montgomery frequently feud, and ne'er have they sent full armies to meet one another. Even if they did, an extra two hundred on the Montgomery's side would make them victorious. My men are well-trained."

Gwen nibbled her lip worriedly. Perhaps that *was* all they needed to do to keep Dageus safe. Already things had been changed. Initially, according to what Drustan had told her in her century, Dageus had gone with only a dozen guard.

"In addition, I instructed the captain that under no circumstances may Dageus engage in battle. Robert would truss Dageus to his horse and flee battle before defying my orders." He sighed before adding, "I also told Dageus what you claimed, before he rode out. He will exercise caution. Nay," he said, when she looked at him hopefully, "not because I believe you, but because I will take no chances, however remote, with my brother's life. We will see if the battle you claimed truly does come to pass."

"Why didn't I think of that?" she exclaimed. "Will you believe me then? If it does?"

His expression grew shuttered. "Off to your chambers, lass. I will have Nell send up a bath and food."

"Oh, get real, Drustan. You don't really believe I could get two clans to go to war against each other just to make my point, do you? That's ridiculous."

His gaze swept her from hair to slippers and back again. "When I look at you, lass, I doona know what I believe and, at the moment, I'm damned weary of looking at you."

"I guess that means I don't get a good-night kiss, huh?" she said, hiding her wounded feelings behind a teasing little pucker.

He froze, his gaze fixed on her lips. Then he shook himself and scowled. "I am a

betrothed man, lass," he said stiffly.

"Remind me to remind you of that the next time you kiss me like you did today," she said pointedly. "You can't just go about kissing one minute and hiding behind a fiancée the next. As you said—you aren't married *yet*."

"And as I recall you didn't care for that sentiment."

"I've changed my mind."

"And I kissed you only because you threw yourself upon me—"

"Oh, hardly. You kissed me because you wanted to," she said coolly. "I may not understand much about emotion, and I may be new to sex, but one thing I *do* know is that you want to kiss me."

She pivoted and stomped up the stairs.

His mouth suddenly dry, Drustan watched her go. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. She was right. He did want to. Again and again and again. Until she melted against him and begged him to take her. New to tugging? He'd like to teach her anything and everything.

And, furthermore, he didn't think he could *ever* grow weary of looking at Gwen Cassidy.

Chapter 18

She was going to seduce him.

That was the solution.

When he'd kissed her yesterday, she'd glimpsed a tiny bit of her Drustan in his eyes. She was simply going to have to *kiss* him back to his senses. Perhaps with each caress he'd reclaim a dim fragment of memory.

She rather liked that idea.

And his fiancée? her conscience whispered.

All's fair in love and war, her heart growled. Sorry, *Anya*, she appended apologetically. *I'm not really a man-stealing girl, but I've fallen in love with him and I'm not giving up without a fight.*

Eyeing herself in the mirror, she smoothed the silk gown and examined herself. The deep-indigo dress made her eyes look bluer than usual. With her cosmetics bag in God-only-knew-what dimension (the scientist briefly pondered a sort of Flatland, wouldn't that be a hoot?), she was grateful her lashes were thick and dark and her skin smooth. But she'd give a lot for her Chapstick, her toothbrush, and even one pair of panties.

Not bad, she decided, turning from side to side. She fluffed her bangs with her fingers, tousling them. She felt rather... soft and curvy and pretty. She hadn't realized that wearing a long silky gown might affect a woman's attitude. It made her feel far more inclined to be feminine than a lab coat ever had. It accentuated all her curves and emphasized her slim waist. The scooped bodice made much of her cleavage.

Drustan had adored her breasts, and she planned to make certain he got to see a lot of them today.

Whatever his feeling for his fiancée, it didn't seem to have diminished his attraction to her one bit.

Bending over at the waist, she cupped her hand beneath one breast, then the

other, fluffing them higher in the snug chemise. When she stood back up and looked in the mirror, she blushed.

One must work with what one has, she reminded herself. He'd said so himself only yesterday.

* * * * *

"Good morning, Silvan. Where's Drustan?" Gwen asked brightly as she slid into a seat next to him at the table.

Nose buried in a book, Silvan didn't glance up, merely finished swallowing a bite of his porridge, then mumbled, "Be with you in a moment, m'dear."

Gwen waited patiently, knowing how much she hated being disturbed when she was reading. Hoping Drustan would saunter in soon, she tipped her head back and admired the elegant balustrade that encircled the upper floor of the Greathall, then dropped her gaze to skim the brilliant tapestries adorning the walls.

The castle was lovely and every bit as lavishly appointed as any of the modern-day castles she'd seen on the tour. Each piece of furniture she'd seen—from the dining table to the assortment of serving and end tables to the towering armoires, chests of drawers, and beds—was fashioned of burnished cherry and painstakingly embellished with intricate designs. The chairs were high, with carved arms and tall backs, topped with bright cushioned pillows and draped with soft woolen throws. The rugs were silky lambskins and woven woolens. Fragrant flowers and herbs were stitched in lace packets, tied with ribbon, and strewn about window ledges.

When she'd come down, she'd passed dozens of maids scurrying through the corridors, airing out down mattresses and beating rugs. Castle Keltar was efficiently run and well-maintained.

All in all, it was amazingly cozy and inviting. The only major difference she could see was a lack of plumbing and lights, and in the winter, of course, lack of central heating would be a nuisance.

But, she mused, with so many fireplaces—most of them tall enough to stand in—and a big brawny Highlander in her bed, a woman might forgive a lot of

things...

She wiped the dreamy smile off her face when Nell sailed in and placed a platter of soft poached eggs and fat strips of ham on the table beside a bowl of peach slices, berries, and nuts in a lake of sweet cream. Next, she plunked down a tray of warm oatcakes and honey.

Gwen's stomach growled as she eyed the laden table. If she had Scotch tape, she could forgo eating and just tape the stuff directly on her hips and thighs, ceding to the inevitable. Her usual bowl of raisin bran before work had never inspired appetite, nor had it inspired the scales to tip heavier.

"Put yer book down, Silvan," Nell chided. "Ye have a guest at the table."

Gwen bit her lip to hide a smile. Everything Drustan had told her about his father and the housekeeper was true. They had a unique relationship, wherein Nell didn't mince words or defer to his position. When Nell glanced at her, Gwen smiled and asked hopefully, "Is there coffee again this morning?"

Silvan put his book down and glanced absently at Gwen. His gaze dropped to her cleavage, and a single white brow shot up. He blinked several times.

"There certainly is," Nell said, circling the table. She stopped behind Gwen and draped a linen cloth over her shoulder, so it tumbled from her neck like a bib.

"Peel yer eyes off the lass's breasts," Nell said sweetly to Silvan.

Gwen turned twenty shades of red, sneaked a hand beneath the bib, and tugged at her bodice, trying to jiggle them back down a little. Mortified, she devoted her attention to eyeing the medieval dining ware—plates and goblets made of heavy silver, a fat spoon and broad knife, and heavy blue bowls.

"She's the one who fluffed them up," Silvan protested indignantly. "I didn't mean to look, but they were... so... *there*. Like trying not to see the sun in the sky."

Nell arched a brow and circled round the table again. "I hardly think'twas ye she fluffed 'em for, was it, lass?"

Gwen glanced up and gave an embarrassed shake of her head.

Nell bent over Silvan's plate, fetching his empty mug for a refill, and her bodice

gaped. When Silvan peered down it, Gwen nearly laughed, but the laugh died in her throat when she saw Silvan's eyes change instantly.

OH, my, she thought, going very still. Silvan might have looked at her breasts, but he'd looked at them as a man might eye a pretty flower or a well-bred mare.

Now, glancing down Nell's bodice, he wore an expression of pure hunger, a look both tender and fierce.

Gwen's smile faded and she stared, filled with a wistfulness she wasn't certain she even understood. But it had something to do with a man wanting breasts that were much older and not nearly as firm—all because of the woman they belonged to, not because of the breasts at all.

Silvan MacKeltar had deep feelings for his housekeeper.

She stole a furtive glance at Nell, who seemed oblivious to what Silvan was doing as she collected his mug and went back to the kitchen.

Silvan must have felt her gaze upon him, because he jerked slightly, as if coming out of a trance, and glanced at her.

"I wasn't looking at her breasts—" he began defensively.

"Save it for someone who didn't see the look on your face. And if you don't make any funny comments about me fluffing myself, I won't make any comments about what you feel for Nell."

"What I feel for—what I—" he sputtered, then nodded. "Agreed."

Gwen turned her attention to the platter of food, wondering why food tasted so much better in the sixteenth century. Was it the lack of preservatives? The smoky-peaty flavor of the meat? The genuine butter and cream? She slipped a knife beneath a soft poached egg and transferred it to her plate.

"So, why did you... er..." Silvan gestured toward her linen bib.

She sighed. "Because I thought Drustan might be at breakfast and I hoped he'd notice me."

"Notice you, or drag you off to tup you?"

"I might have settled for either," she said glumly, helping herself to another egg.

Silvan snorted with amusement. "Are you always so honest, m'dear?"

"I try to be. Dishonesty increases disorder exponentially. It's hard enough to communicate when you're telling the truth."

Silvan paused, his mouth halfway closed around a bite of poached egg. He withdrew the laden fork from his mouth carefully. "What did you just say?" he asked softly.

"Lies," Gwen said, her gaze on the thick slab of ham she was trying to spear with a misshapen fork. She pierced it with a tine, but it slipped off. "They increase disorder. Difficult to predict all the variables when you keep tossing more variables in." She glanced at him. "Don't you think?" she asked, with a nod for emphasis.

"Exponentially?" he asked, his brows furrowing together in a single point.

"Any positive consonant raised to a power," Gwen said, cornering the ham against the lip of the platter. "It's a function of math, used to express a large number. Like Avogadro's number, 6.023×10^{23} and represents the number of atoms in a mole of any substance—"

"Atom?"

"The smallest component of an element having the chemical properties of the element, consisting of a nucleus, containing combinations of neutrons and protons and one or more electrons—*hey*, maybe I shouldn't be telling you this!"

Silvan snorted. "I know of what you speak. 'Tis a hypothetical particle of matter so small to admit no division—"

No, no, no, no *physics over breakfast!* "Yes, but who cares? Look at this scrumptious food."

He sounded strained when he asked, "Do you play chess, m'dear?"

She brightened and, finally securing the ham, smiled. "Of course. Would you like to play?"

"On the terrace. In two hours, if you will."

Gwen beamed. Drustan's father wanted to spend time with her and play a game. She couldn't recall a time her father had ever done such a thing. Everything had been work-oriented, and the one time she'd coaxed him into a game of Pente, he'd gone off on how one could calculate every possible outcome...

She shook her head, pushing that memory far to the back of her mind, and eyed Silvan speculatively. Maybe, if Drustan had told him her story, she could work on him. Perhaps he might be more inclined to listen. Winning his support would definitely help.

All while sitting in the sun and *playing*...

* * * * *

"I don't usually show so much cleavage, Nell," Gwen poked her head in the kitchen and said apologetically to Nell's back. She had some time to pass before meeting Silvan and wanted to get better acquainted with Nell. She suspected the housekeeper probably knew everything that went on in the castle and might be a source of information regarding who might wish the MacKeltars harm. Plus, she didn't want Nell to think badly of her. Next time she bared so much, she would make sure it was for Drustan and only Drustan. Her breasts were now demurely tucked beneath her bodice.

Nell glanced over her shoulder. Flour dusted her cheek and brow, and she had her hands in a mountain of dough. "I dinna think ye did, lass," she said with a gentle smile. "Despite ye showin' up bare as a babe. I know oft-times a lass feels she has few choices. Ye needn't barter yerself for shelter and food. I suspect ye've more choices than yer thinkin' ye do."

"What kind of choices?" Gwen asked, stepping into the kitchen.

"Know ye aught about bakin', Gwen?" Nell withdrew her hands from the dough.

Gwen nibbled her lip uncertainly. "Not really, but I'm game to try." Is that what Nell meant about choices? Were they going to offer her a job in the kitchen? A dismal vision of herself cooking for Drustan and his wife made her scowl.

"Ye've two fine hands and, if ye dinna mind, I could start on the lamb. Just poke 'em in there and knead. Wash up first."

Gwen washed and dried her hands before poking tentatively at the mound. Once she'd sunk her hands in it, she decided it was rather fun. Sort of like Play-Doh, which of course she'd not been allowed to have. No Silly Putty either. Her Sunday comics (neatly removed from the paper before she ever got to it) had consisted of her father's witty drawings of black holes sucking up all the Democrats who preferred to fund the environment over the Department of Defense's obscenely expensive research projects.

"That's it, lass," Nell encouraged, watching her. She skewered a large roast on a spit. "Now, do ye wish to talk about it?"

"About what?" Gwen asked uncertainly.

"What happened the night ye arrived. If ye dinna wish to, I willna pry, but I've a willin' ear and a shoulder if yer needin' it."

Gwen's hands stilled deep in the dough and she was silent a long moment, thinking. "How long have you been here, Nell?"

"Nigh on twelve years," Nell answered proudly.

"And have you ever noticed anything... er, unusual about Drustan? Or any of the MacKeltars," she added, wondering how much Nell knew. A part of her longed to confide in Nell; there was no question in her mind how loyal the housekeeper was to her men. Still, it would be safer to acquire more information before revealing any.

Nell finished basting the roast, then slid it above the fire before answering. Wiping her hands on a cloth, she regarded Gwen levelly. "Be ye meanin' their magic ways?" she said bluntly.

Magic. That was exactly what Drustan's unusual intelligence and command of cosmology would seem to a sixteenth-century woman. Heavens, it was exactly what it seemed to her. Although she knew there was a scientific theory behind his use of the stones, she couldn't begin to comprehend how he'd done it. "Yes, that's what I mean. Like the voice Drustan can use—"

"Ye've heard it?" Nell said, surprised, making a mental note to pass that tidbit on to Silvan. "The one that sounds like many voices?"

"Yes."

"He dinna use it on ye, did he?" Nell frowned.

"No. Well, once, sort of, when he asked me to leave him alone for a little while." And that other time, she thought, remembering what he'd said after they'd made love, but telling Nell about that would definitely be overdisclosing.

"I'm surprised. They're overcautious of that spell. Most often they use the healin' and protectin' spells."

Gwen gawked.

"If ye've heard Drustan use the voice, ye shouldna be too surprised. Druids have many unusual abilities." Nell let it slip casually.

Druids! The mythical alchemists and astronomers, who'd studied the sacred geometry of the ancients! They'd really existed? "I thought Druidry died out long ago."

Nell shook her head. " 'Tis what Druids wish people to believe, but nay. The MacKeltar descend from the oldest line of Druids who served the *Tuatha de Danaan*."

"The fairy?" Gwen squeaked, remembering that Drustan had claimed they were one and the same.

"Aye, the fae. But the fae have long gone elsewhere and now the Druids nurture the land. They tend the soil and beckon the seasons with their rituals. They honor the old ways. They scour the land after storms and heal the wee creatures harmed by the tempest. They protect the villages, and legends tell that if a grave threat should e'er come against the land, they have powers most scarce dare not whisper of."

"Oh, God," Gwen murmured, as the pieces began to slip into place. A Druid. Possessed of alchemy and sacred mathematics and magic.

There's no such thing as magic, the scientist protested.

Right, there's no such thing as time travel either, she retorted acerbically. Whatever it was, he had knowledge beyond her comprehension. Druids existed,

and the man who'd taken her virginity was one.

"Tell me, lass, knowing he's a Druid, do ye still have a fondness for Drustan MacKeltar?"

Gwen nodded without hesitation.

Nell wiped her hands on her apron and propped them at her waist. "Three times now that man has been betrothed, and three times the woman has abandoned him before the formal vows. Did ye know that?"

Gwen's jaw dropped. "This is his *fourth* betrothal?"

"Aye," Nell said. "But'tis not because he's not a fine man," she said defensively. "'Tis because the lasses fear him. And much though he wishes otherwise, I suspect Anya Elliott will be no different. The lass has been sheltered all her young life." Her lip curled disdainfully. "Och, but he's arranged things quite tidily this time. In the past, he handfasted first, and each of the three, after passin' time at Castle Keltar, upon overseeing or overhearing somethin' that fashed 'em, packed up and left with scarce a farewell. And as braw and rich in coin and land as that man is—well, let me tell you it's left him fair uncertain of his charms. Imagine that!"

"Impossible to imagine," Gwen agreed, wide-eyed. Suddenly, quite a few things made sense. She'd wondered why Drustan hadn't told her the full truth while they were in her century. Now she knew. Her brilliant, powerful warrior had been afraid that she would leave him. He couldn't have known that she was one of few people who might have understood him—after all, she'd concealed the extent of her intelligence from him. In the past few years of working at Allstate, it had become instinctive. One didn't rhapsodize about quarks and neutrons and black holes during happy hour at Applebee's with insurance adjusters.

Three failed betrothals also explained why Drustan was so aggressively determined to wed his fourth betrothed. The Drustan she'd come to know was not a man to accept failure, and he'd made it clear that he was a man for marrying and wanted children.

"This time he's arranged to wed in a Christian ceremony, and Anya will be here but a fortnight afore the wedding. I fear he will succeed in hiding his nature until

after the vows. Then she willna be able to leave him. But"—she paused and sighed—"like as not, it willna prevent her from despising him later in the marriage."

"Has it occurred to him that it's not nice to trick a woman like that?" Gwen said, grasping at straws. Maybe she could berate him for his underhanded tactics and guilt him into calling off the betrothal. Then again, she thought, maybe *she* could be underhanded, and once Anya arrived she could trick him into revealing some of his "magic" in front of his fiancée, to drive her the same route the first three had gone. Dirty pool, but all in the name of love, and that had to count for something, didn't it?

"I suspect he's preferrin' to believe he's not trickin' her but hoping that she'll one day grow to care for him. Or mayhap he thinks he can hide forever."

Gwen poked at the dough for a time. "How long has he known her?" she finally asked. *Does he love her very much?* was the question coiled on the tip of her tongue.

"He's ne'er met the lass," Nell said flatly. "The marriage was arranged between Drustan and the Elliott through messengers bearing the bride offer."

"He's never met her?" Gwen shouted. Her heart took wing; feelings of guilt about trying to break up the betrothal went up in a puff of smoke. He hadn't neglected to mention Anya because he loved Anya; he'd not mentioned her because he'd not even met her! It wasn't as if she was trying to break up a *real* relationship!

Nell smiled faintly. "Och, ye've much feelin' for him. 'Tis plain to see."

Feeling suddenly euphoric, Gwen said pertly, "Speaking of feeling that's plain to see, what about you and Silvan?"

Nell's smile faded instantly and her expression grew shuttered. "There is naught betwixt me and that canny old badger."

"Well, there may not be on your end, but there certainly is on his."

"Where do ye get yer daft ideas?" Nell snapped, leaping into a flurry of activity, banging pots and moving dishes. "Let me finish that bread, for'tis plain that it'll

be the morrow before ye've got it properly kneaded."

Gwen was unfazed. Nell's reaction told her everything. "He peeked down your bodice when you took his mug."

"He did no such thing!"

"He did. And trust me, he didn't like mine a tenth as much. Nell, Silvan has deep feelings for you."

Nell paused in her frantic kneading and bit her lip. When she looked at Gwen, her eyes were pained. "Dinna be sayin' such things," she said quietly.

"In twelve years haven't you and Silvan ever—"

"Nay."

"But you care for him, don't you?"

Nell blew out a slow breath. "I loved a laird once. It cost me my babes and nearly my life."

"What happened? I don't mean to pry..." Gwen trailed off uncertainly.

"What happened? Ye truly wish to know what happened?" Nell's voice rose. She punched the mound of dough several times before kneading furiously.

"Er... yes," Gwen said warily.

"I was a fool,'tis what happened. I loved a laird who had a wife of his own, though there was no love betwixt them. An arranged match, it was, made on land and alliances. I resisted him for years, but the day my mam died, thick in grievin', I weakened. 'Twas not what I believed proper, but och, how I loved that man." She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I suspect my mother dyin' made me realize we dinna have forever."

How true, Gwen thought. She certainly hadn't had forever. She'd always thought she and her parents would mend fences; she'd never dreamed they wouldn't live another twenty, thirty, even forty more years.

"We were discreet; still, his lady learned of our involvement. She shrieked and

raged, but she'd given him no heirs, and by then I'd given him two sons." A shadow crossed her features. "Then one afternoon he was killed while hunting. That very eve, she took my children and set her kin upon me. They left me for dead near Balanoch."

"Oh, Nell," Gwen breathed, her eyes misting.

"I lost what would have been our third child in the dust. 'Twas Silvan who found me. Ne'er will I forget starin' up at the sun, waitin' to die, *wishin'* to die, only to see him"—a bittersweet smile curved her lip—"like a fierce angel, standin' o'er me. He took me in and stood by my bed and demanded that I live, in such a voice that

I feared to die and defy him." Her smile deepened. "He tended me himself, for weeks..."

"What about your children?" Gwen asked hesitantly.

Nell shook her head. "As she'd had none, she claimed them as her own. 'Tis said she's barren, and my son will one day be laird, as his only heir."

"You've never seen them again?"

"Nay, but occasionally I hear bits of gossip. My Jamie is fostered outside of Edinburgh. Mayhap when she's no longer alive I'll see them again, but they willna know me. They were but one and two when I was driven out. They believe she's their true mam."

"Didn't Silvan try to get them back for you?"

"And I could give them what?" Nell snapped. Then she sighed and muttered, "I never told him what happened. And that bletherin' fool has not once asked. In twelve years! Imagine that."

"Maybe he was afraid to pry once you'd healed," Gwen suggested. "He might not have wanted to bring up painful memories. Maybe he's been waiting for you to bring it up."

"Mayhap," Nell said stiffly, blowing a wisp of hair from her face, "ye put a rosy hue on things that arena so rosy. Go on with ye, now," she said crossly. "There

are some things'tis too late for. Dinna fash yerself over me. I've passed many a peaceful day here. If ye wish to give me happier ones, fall in love with one o' those lads and give me bairn to cuddle again."

"Um... what if it's Drustan?" Gwen said nervously. "Would you think I was terrible if I tried to make him care about me before he marries his fiancée?"

Nell cocked her head and met Gwen's gaze levelly. "I suspect I have a few special gowns I could alter for ye, lass. He's overfond of purple, did ye know that?"

Gwen beamed.

"Now go," Nell shooed her, flipping a cloth at her.

She started to walk out, then turned back abruptly, squeezed Nell's shoulder, and kissed her floured cheek. Then she dashed hastily off, embarrassed by her impulsive display of affection.

Nell blinked and smiled, eyeing the empty corridor. Aye, she was going to like the lass a lot. She and Silvan had been worrying for months about Drustan wedding the Elliott lass. Neither of them held much hope for the match. They both sensed the quiet desperation in Drustan and knew he was plunging blindly into something that was bound to become a fankle. Duty weighed on him; he needed heirs. Anya Elliott was ten and five, and Drustan MacKeltar would patently terrify the child. Oh, he might get a bairn or two off her, but he'd pay for it with a lifetime of misery. As would the unsuspecting Anya. Drustan needed an educated lass, a lass with fire and mettle and curiosity.

Yestreen, Silvan had asked a favor of her (not looking at her, of course, as if noticing her hair earlier had been an unforgivable sin), and she had done her part as he'd requested. Gwen Cassidy now knew Drustan was a Druid.

She could scarce wait to tell Silvan how Gwen had reacted—with an open mind and heart—just as Silvan had predicted. She'd glimpsed no signs of madness in the lass—och, she was odd, but that didn't make a person mad, or the eccentric Silvan would be maddest of all.

Her smile faded at the thought of Silvan, as she recalled what Gwen had said about him having feelings for her.

Might it be? She and Silvan scarcely spoke but for conversation about the lads, the crops, or the weather. Long ago she'd once thought he'd been interested, but he'd retreated and she'd tried to forget.

She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully and glanced down at her bosom. It was still fluffable.

Had he truly glanced down her bodice? She was never comfortable looking at him when she was standing dose. The man could peek anywhere he wanted and she'd not notice.

Mayhap, she mused, while stitching Gwen some tempting fashions, she might deepen the bodice of her new gown that was nearly finished.

* * * * *

Silvan was waiting on the terrace, at a table centered in a puddle of sunshine, beneath rustling oaks.

Gwen took the seat opposite him and glanced about with delight. "It's so beautiful here," she said with a contented sigh. A brilliant yellow butterfly swooped the board, lingering a moment before fluttering off again.

"Aye, our mountain is the finest in all of Alba," Silvan said proudly, as he finished setting up the pieces.

When he was done, Gwen turned the heavy board around, reversing it.

He glanced askance at her.

"I have to be black. I don't like to go first," she explained, fingering the ebony figurines. An honest-to-God medieval chess set, she thought wonderingly. It would be worth a fortune in her time. The pieces were fashioned of ebony wood and ivory tusk. The rooks were solemn little men, the bishops had long beards and wise little faces. The knights were kilt-clad warriors on prancing destriers, the royalty wore flowing robes trimmed with fur and stood several inches above the rest. The board itself was fashioned of alternating squares of ivory and ebony. The surrounding perimeter was a solid rectangle of ebony, carved with a complex design of Celtic knotwork that represented infinity.

How on earth had the twenty-first century gotten the idea that medieval men

were ignorant? she wondered. She was beginning to suspect that perhaps they were more in tune with the world than her century would ever be.

Silvan pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. "Why do I think I might be in for a time of it?"

"Why do I think you might be able to give as good as you get?" she countered.

"How long have you been playing?"

"All my life. You?"

"All my life. Which has been considerably longer than yours," he said dryly as he moved a pawn with swift certainty.

Two games later—one win to Silvan, one to Gwen—they were into a more interesting variation. Normal chess was too much of a draw between them, so Gwen had proposed they play progressive chess, wherein pawns didn't "queen" but rather increased in power with each square they advanced. In progressive chess, a pawn on the fifth rank had the power of play of a knight, on the sixth a bishop, seventh a rook, and on the eighth a queen.

When she declared checkmate, with her two queens, a bishop, and three knights, he clapped his hands and saluted her.

"And Drustan thinks you're a bampot," he murmured, smiling.

"He told you that?" she asked, feeling wounded. "Forget it," she added hastily. "It doesn't matter. Just tell me this: Do you know of anyone who might wish your clan harm, Silvan?"

"None. 'Tis a peaceful land, and the Keltar know no enemies."

"No clans who wish to conquer you?"

"Ha," Silvan scoffed. "None that would dare try."

"How about... um... the king?" she grasped at straws.

Silvan rolled his eyes. "Nay. James likes me. I performed magic tricks for the boy-king when last I was in Edinburgh. His council seeks no battle in our

Highlands.

"Maybe Drustan angered someone's husband?" she pried none-too-subtly.

"Drustan doesn't tup married wenches, m'dear."

She smiled, pleased by that bit of knowledge.

"Or maidens," he said pointedly.

She scowled. "Can I tell *you* my whole story?"

"Nay." At her wounded expression he added, "Words cost nothing, they buy nothing. Actions speak truth. You neatly trounced me at progressive chess. Were I to suspect you of aught, it wouldn't be to think you mad but to believe you some sort of Druid yourself. Mayhap come to spy upon us—"

"First Drustan thinks I'm crazy," Gwen interrupted glumly, "now you think I'm a spy."

"—or, in the future, lasses are better educated. If you permit a man to finish, m'dear, you'll see that I was merely pointing out possibilities. They are endless. Time will have out. I am interested in your heart, not your words."

"You have no idea how nice it is to hear someone say that."

One silvery brow rose.

"Until I met your son, Silvan, I wasn't even certain I had a heart. Now I know I do, and that bonehead is going to marry someone he's never even met. She's never going to be as right for him as I am."

"Bonehead," he repeated, smiling faintly. His other brow rose. "You told me you didn't wish me to make him wed you," he said softly.

"I don't want you to make him. I want him to *want* to. I'm telling you, we're perfect for each other. He just doesn't remember that. If my story is true," she added archly, "I could be carrying your grandson. Have you thought of that, O wise one?"

Silvan burst out laughing. He laughed so long and loudly that Nell poked her

head out, with a smile herself, to see what was going on.

When he finally stopped, he patted Gwen's hand. "None but Drustan has ever called me that in such a tone. Irreverent you are, clever and bold. Aye, Gwen Cassidy, I'll give him a nudge or two in your direction. I'd planned to anyway."

Gwen tucked her bangs behind her ears and smiled at him. "Again?" she asked.

As they began resetting the pieces, Nell came out on the terrace, depositing two mugs of warm ale.

"Join us, Nell," Silvan said. Nell glanced dubiously at Silvan, until Gwen patted the seat beside her.

For the next few hours, Gwen watched Silvan and Nell in what she was certain had become a longtime ritual: his head turned, hers wouldn't. Her head turned, his stayed down. They managed to look at each other only if the other wasn't looking. Not once did the older couple make direct eye contact. Somehow they were so attuned that Silvan could sense when Nell's gaze had wandered up to watch a golden eagle soar beyond the castle, and Nell could sense when Silvan was so intent upon the game that he'd not notice her watching him.

It was amazing, really, Gwen realized. They were so in love with each other, and neither of them knew it.

Maybe her own life was unraveling at the seams, but surely she could do something to bring those two together.

When the sun had nearly completed its lazy crawl across the sky, smearing streaks of rose and liquid gold across the horizon, Nell pushed herself up and went off to prepare the evening meal.

She cast a glance over her shoulder at Gwen and made a fluffing motion to her bodice. "Dinna be forgettin' to dress for dinner," she said with a wink. "He never misses a meal, and I made his favorite this eve—roast suckling pig, neeps, and tatties."

Oh, she'd dress, all right.

* * * * *

But Drustan didn't come to dinner that night.

As a matter of fact, the stubborn man managed to hide from her for nearly a week.

Chapter 19

Chaos had stormed his castle, dressed in lusciously low-cut gowns, silky slippers, and ribbons, Drustan brooded, raking his hair back and tying it with a leather thong.

None of his fortress's defenses were useful against her, unless he wished to declare open warfare, mount up the guards, and dust off the catapult.

At which point, of course, his da and Nell would laugh themselves silly.

He'd been avoiding her since the day he'd taken her to Balanoch.

The next time he touched her, he'd tup her. He knew that. He fisted his hands at his sides, inhaling sharply.

His only recourse was to avoid her completely until Dageus returned with Anya. When Dageus confirmed that no such battle had occurred, he would have her removed from his castle and sent far away.

How far will be far enough? a most unwelcome voice asked. He knew that voice well. It was the one that endeavored daily to convince him that he had every right to take her to his bed.

A most dangerous, frighteningly persuasive voice.

He groaned and closed his eyes. He enjoyed a blissful moment's respite, until her laughter, lifted by the buoyant summer breeze, soared through the open window of his chamber.

Eyes narrowed, he peered out, both dreading and anticipating what gown she might have donned today. Would it be purple, violet, indigo, lavender? It was almost as if she knew of his preference for the vibrant color. And with her golden hair, she looked splendid in it.

This morn she wore sheer mauve with a golden girdle. No surcoat, in deference to the sunny weather. Succulent, creamy breasts rose from the simple scooped neck. She'd piled her blond tresses atop her head and, threaded with violet ribbons, it tumbled in delightful disarray about her face. She sauntered across his

lawn, as if all his estate belonged to her.

For the past week she'd been everywhere he'd wanted to be, driving him to seek seclusion wherever it could be found. He'd ducked into chambers in the castle he'd forgotten even existed.

She hadn't bothered to be subtle about it. The moment she saw him, she chased about after him wearing a ferocious scowl, jabbering away about "things" she had to tell him.

Daily her tactics grew more sly and underhanded. Last night the audacious wench had picked the lock to his chamber! Because he'd had the foresight to barricade the door with a heavy armoire, she'd then gone to his door in the corridor and picked that lock. He'd been forced to escape out the window. Halfway down he'd slipped, crashed the last fifteen feet to the ground, and landed in a prickly bush. Since he'd not had time to don his trews, his manly parts had taken the brunt of his abrupt entry into the bush, putting him in a foul mood indeed.

The wench sought to unman him before his long-anticipated wedding night.

His every movement, every thought, every decision was being directly affected by her presence, and he resented it.

Her finger was even in the food he ate in the garrison with the guards, safely away from her, as Nell had begun "experimenting" with new recipes, and he'd like to know what the blethering hell was wrong with the old ones.

And she'd begun learning to ride, had indeed coaxed the stable master to teach her (probably for the cost of a smile with a dimple on one side, for he certainly hadn't seen her shoveling out the stables). In midafternoon she could be found prancing about on a gentle mare across the front lawn of the estate, impairing his passage. He had to admit, she'd found her seat rather well. Any day now, when he vaulted astride his horse to escape her, she'd follow him.

His life had been so orderly before her arrival. Now his life was ordered about her schedule and how to avoid her. He'd been heading toward certain success, all the things he'd longed for. Just the day before she'd appeared on their doorstep, he'd been dreaming of holding his first son in his arms within the year, God

willing that young Anya would catch a babe so quickly.

But now he dreamed of *her*. This morn, when he'd sneaked into his chamber for a change of clothing, he'd heard the splash of her bath. He'd paced from hearth to window and back again, convinced she was splashing far more than necessary just to force him to think of rosy breasts and thighs and silken gold hair, misted with glistening beads of water.

Drustan stared out the window, scowling. She was driving him mad. How could so wee a wench create such havoc with his senses?

Last night, after he'd fallen out his own window, he'd tried to catch a short nap in the hall. A short time later, she'd wandered down. There he'd been sitting, feet propped up, staring with heavy-lidded eyes into the fire, seeing golden tresses in the flames, when he'd caught a whiff of her unique scent and turned to see her standing on the stairs.

Clad only in a diaphanous night rail.

Drustan, you can't keep avoiding me, she'd said.

Without a word, he'd leaped to his feet and fled the castle. He'd gone to sleep in the stables.

The laird of the castle, catching winks in the stables, by Amergin!

But had he stayed within the walls, he would have made short work of her sheer rail, kissed and suckled and devoured every inch of her body.

His traitorous father and Nell weren't making things any easier. They'd welcomed her into their lives with the enthusiasm of parents who'd finally gotten the daughter they'd longed for. Nell sewed for her, dressing her in luscious creations, Silvan played chess with her on the terrace, and Drustan had no doubt that once Dageus returned he'd like as not set to trying to seduce the lovely witch.

And Drustan would have no right to complain.

He was getting married. If Dageus wanted to seduce the lass, what right had he to argue?

He crashed his fist down on the stone window ledge. A sennight. He had only to avoid her until then. The moment Dageus returned, confirming there'd been no battle, he would pack the lass off to Edinburgh, aye—mayhap England. He'd send her with a flank of guards, finding some excuse to keep his flirtatious brother at home.

Thrumming with frustrated energy, he stomped from his chamber. He would go for another long ride and try to while away yet another eternal day, ticking them off on a calendar in his head: one day nearer salvation.

As he loped down the hall toward the servants' stairs, he stiffened and spun about. By God, he would *not* skulk out the back entrance again.

If she was fool enough to try something when he was in such a mood, she would suffer for it.

* * * * *

Drustan rounded the corner at a full charge and crashed abruptly into Nevin.

"Milord!" Nevin gasped, flying backward.

"Sorry." He grabbed the priest by the elbows and steadied him on his feet.

Nevin smoothed his robes, blinking. "Nay,'twas my fault. I fear I was lost in thought and didn't hear your approach. But'tis grateful I am for our encounter. I was coming to seek you out, if you have a moment. There's a wee matter I wished to discuss with you."

Drustan tamped down a flash of impatience, then got angry that he was feeling impatient to begin with. It was *her* fault. He'd whiled away many a fine hour talking with Nevin and not once suffered impatience; he liked the young priest. He took a deep, calming breath and forced a smile. "Is aught amiss with the chapel?" he asked, the cameo of patient interest.

"Nay. It goes well, milord. We have but to replace the altar stones and seal the new planking. It will be finished in ample time." Nevin paused. " 'Twas a different matter I wished to speak with you about."

"You needn't hesitate to speak your mind with me," Drustan assured him. Nevin seemed reluctant to broach whatever topic was worrying him. Had he seen the

bampot chasing him about? Was the priest concerned about his upcoming betrothal? *God knows, I am*, he thought darkly.

"Tis my mother again..." Nevin trailed off, sighing.

Drustan released a pent breath and relaxed. It was only Besseta.

"She's been agitated lately, muttering about some danger she thinks I'm in."

"More of her fortune-telling?" Drustan asked dryly. Was the estate to be overrun with addled women spouting dire predictions?

"Aye," Nevin said glumly.

"Well, at least now'tis you she's worried about. A fortnight past, she was telling Silvan that my brother and I were 'cloaked in darkness,' or something of the like. What does she fear will happen to you?"

"Tis the oddest thing. She seems to think your betrothed will harm me in some fashion."

"Any?" Drustan laughed. "She's but five and ten. And, I've heard, a most biddable lass."

Nevin shook his head with a rueful smile. "Milord,'tis futile to seek sense in it. My mother is not well. If you should encounter her and she carries on like a madwoman,'tis because she's worsening daily. I believe the walk to the castle is beyond her abilities, but should she somehow manage it, I beg you be gentle with her. She's ill, very ill."

"I'll warn Da and Dageus. Doona fash yourself, we'll simply guide her back home should she roam." He made a mental note to be kinder to the old woman. He hadn't realized she was so ill.

"Thank you, milord."

Drustan started down the corridor again, then stopped and glanced back. He enjoyed Nevin's philosophical mind and wondered how the priest reconciled a fortune-telling mother with his faith. It might also shed light on his tolerance for the MacKeltar. Drustan knew Nevin had been in residence long enough to have heard most of the rumors by now. Men of the Kirk generally held staunch views

on pagan doings, but Nevin radiated some inner understanding that defied Drustan's comprehension. "Do any of her predictions ever come true?"

Nevin smiled serenely. "If there is aught of truth in her yew castings, 'tis because God chooses to speak in such manner."

"You doona think pagan and Christian are breached by an irreconcilable chasm?"

Nevin considered his answer a moment. "I know 'tis the common belief, but nay. It offends me not that she reads her sticks; it grieves me that she thinks to change what she sees therein. His Will will be."

"So has she been right or not?" Drustan pressed. Nevin was oft evasive, difficult to pin down. But Drustan sensed he didn't intend to be evasive, he was merely nonjudgmental to an extreme.

"If someone is to harm me, 'tis my Father's will. I shan't naysay Him."

"In other words, you won't tell me."

Nevin's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Milord, God doesn't bear any of His creations ill will. He give us opportunities. 'Tis all in the way you view it. My mother has a suspicious mind, so she sees suspicious things. Keep your eyes open, milord, for the chances He gives you. Keep your heart true, and I bid you, use what gifts He may have given you with love, and you will never wander from His grace."

"What do you mean, 'gifts'?"

Another calm smile, and some fascinating awareness in Nevin's clear blue gaze.

Drustan smiled uneasily and wound down the corridors to the Greathall.

* * * * *

Gwen had just walked into the hall and slumped into a chair when he came down.

She nearly fell off her chair, so startled was she to see him walking *toward* her and not skulking out the back entrance. Her first instinct was to leap up, fling her arms around his leg like a child, and cling so he couldn't get away from her. But she reconsidered, thinking he might just shake her off him and stomp her, if the

expression on his face was a true indication of his feelings about her at the moment. He was awe-inspiringly large.

She decided to try the subtle approach. "Does this mean you've finally decided to listen to me, you pigheaded, stubborn Neanderthal?"

He walked past her as if he hadn't even heard her.

"Drustan!"

"What?" he snapped, spinning around to look at her. "Can't you leave me in peace? My life was fine, wonderful until you appeared. Flitting about"—his gaze raked over her bountiful curves, nicely fluffed in her gown—"trying to tempt me into making a fankle of my wedding—"

"Flitting? Tempting *you*! Could you show off your legs more? Walk around with no shirt on a bit more often? Oh, silly me, of course you couldn't, you're shirtless *all* the time."

Drustan blinked, and she saw the hint of her Drustan's grin tugging at his lips, but he fought it admirably.

Casually, he adjusted his sporran, hiking his plaid up a bit more. He tossed his silky black hair over his shoulder and arched a dark brow.

Her hormones broke out party streamers and kazoos.

She leaned forward, folding her arms beneath her chest. She felt the edging on her bodice graze her nipple. Two *can play that game, Drustan*.

His silvery eyes changed instantly. Icy amusement was replaced by untamed lust. For a long, suspended moment, she thought he was going to duck his head, charge her, and carry her up the stairs to a bed.

She held her breath, hoping. If he did, at least then she might be able to soothe him enough to get him to listen—after, of course, they made love nine million times and her own hormones had been properly soothed.

She peeped at him from beneath her brows, her gaze a blatant challenge. A come-hither-if-you-dare look. She hadn't known she had it in her. But she was realizing there were a lot of things she hadn't known she had in her, until she'd

met Drustan MacKeltar.

"You know naught what you provoke," he growled.

"Oh, yes, I do," she shot right back. "A coward. A man who's afraid to hear me out because I might prove inconvenient to his plans. I might dishevel his tidy world," she mocked.

The flicker in his eyes blazed into flame. His gaze raked over her exposed bosom. She nearly gasped at the savagery in his expression; he was shaking, vibrating with suppressed... desire?

"Is that what you want? You want me to tup you?" he demanded roughly.

"If that's the only way I can get you to hold still long enough to listen to me," she snapped.

"Were I to tup you, lass, you wouldna be speakin', for your mouth would be busy with other things, and I, of a certain, wouldna be listenin'. So give over, unless you're lookin' for a rough roll in the heather with a man who wishes he'd never laid eyes upon you."

He spun on his heel and stalked out the door.

When he was gone, Gwen sighed gustily. She knew that for a moment she'd almost had him, had almost provoked him into another kiss, but the man's willpower was nothing short of amazing.

She knew he was attracted to her, it crackled in the air between them. She consoled herself with the thought that he must have some doubts or he wouldn't be so studiously avoiding her.

Whatever his reasons, too many days were slipping by with nothing to show for them, and the arrival of his betrothed drew nearer, as did his impending abduction.

Although she'd cornered him on two occasions, he'd jumped upon his horse and galloped away, and until her riding improved, it was an effective escape.

She felt like a fool, trying to be everywhere, watching for a glimpse of him. She'd picked the lock on his chamber door last night, only to find he'd slipped

out the window and scaled the damn castle wall to get away from her.

When he'd crashed into the prickly bush, she'd stared with wide eyes, any thoughts of laughing firmly squelched by the sight of him nude. It had been all she could do not to fling herself out the window at him. He was magnificent. Watching him stroll around every day was killing her. Especially when he wore a kilt, because she knew from experience that he wore nothing beneath it. The thought of him hung heavy and naked beneath his plaid made her mouth go dry every time she looked at him. Probably because all the moisture in her body went somewhere else.

Her antics had not gone unnoticed, nor had she missed that several of the maids and guards had taken to loitering about the castle proper, watching with unconcealed amusement.

Love hath no pride...

Yeah, well, Gwen Cassidy did, and humbling herself wasn't a whole lot of fun.

She suspected that by the time she finally wore him down—as stubborn as he was—she was going to be downright pissed off.

Didn't he know how dangerous it was to piss off a woman?

Chapter 20

Gwen had a plan.

Foolproof so far as she could see.

She'd had ample time to reflect upon the errors of her ways. Although the list was long and inclusive of virtually everything she'd done since the moment she'd arrived in the sixteenth century, it was not beyond salvaging. She was still astonished by how thoroughly emotions could cloud one's actions. Never in her life had she done so many stupid things in such rapid succession.

But she was under control now, and soon to be in control of him.

She was going to tell him her story again, only this time he was going to listen to every single detail of it: From the moment he'd awakened in the cave to the moment she'd lost him, including what he'd eaten, said, worn, what she'd eaten, said, worn. And somewhere in it, she was convinced she'd find the catalyst that would make him remember. She'd pondered closed timeline curves for hours last night, along with the thermodynamic, psychological, and cosmological arrows of time. She was convinced the memory was imprinted in his DNA, and despite the arrows indicating one could only remember forward, not backward, she wasn't quite certain she believed that.

She was going to give it her best shot to prove the theory wrong. After all, the quantum was rarely predictable. Even Richard Feynman, winner of the Nobel prize in physics for his work in quantum electrodynamics, had maintained that nobody really understood quantum theory. Mathematical theory was vastly different than the world implied by such equations.

She'd concluded that there had never been two Drustans, merely two fourth-dimensional manifestations of a single set of cells. Rather like a solitary beam of light refracted by a prism, where the beam of light was Drustan, and the prism was the fourth dimension. Although the single light aimed into the prism would refract in multiple directions, it was still only one source of light. Were that light a person, why wouldn't his cells bear the imprint of his alternate journey? If the memory was there, perhaps remembering would be too confusing, so the mind would seek to resolve those "memories" by labeling them "dreams"; if recalled at

all, discarded as nocturnal fancies.

Drustan was going to listen to every word, if she had to talk herself hoarse.

And she knew just how and where he was going to be doing it, she thought smugly, tucking the lance beneath her arm. She might be small, but she was *not* harmless. Enough shilly-shallying about, feeling wounded and ineffectual. It was time to do battle.

* * * * *

"Get in there and try it," Gwen told the guard.

He cast her a dubious glance.

"Go on, just try it," she said peevishly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The guard glanced at Silvan, who was leaning against the wall, arms folded, smiling. At his nod, the guard sighed and did as he was told.

"Can you get out?" Gwen asked a few moments later.

There was the sound of muffled thuds, kicks, and punches, then, "Nay, milady, I canna."

"Try harder," Gwen encouraged.

More thuds. Soft cursing. *Good*, she mused. *Perfect*.

She and Silvan exchanged smug grins.

* * * * *

Drustan crept down the stairs, his bare feet silent on the stones. It was four in the morning, and although she was asleep, stealth was ever wise with *her* in residence. He'd heard her enter her chamber last eve, try the connecting door, then sigh and lean against it when she found it still barricaded. The bed ropes had squeaked for a time as she'd tossed, but finally all had grown quiet.

He'd stretched out on his back in his bed, hands folded behind his head, refusing to think about her sleeping nude on the other side of the wall. But the tricky part about refusing to think about something was that you had to think about it in order to remind yourself what not to think about.

And he knew she would. Sleep with nothing on, that is. She was a sensual wee lass who would enjoy the silky slide of velvet coverlets against her fine, smooth, creamy skin. Slipping with tender velvety abrasion over her puckered nipples, twining about her hips, probably twisting and turning to enjoy—

Exasperated, Drustan gave a vicious shake of his head. Christ, he was going mad, that was all there was to it.

Probably from being spied on all the time. She thought he didn't know she lurked about watching him all the time, but he knew. She was a living heat, strolling about his castle, all lush curves and temptation.

Thus such stealth to do a man's business. He could have gone outside, but it irritated him that he'd even briefly considered it. It was his castle, by Amergin! She was making him positively irrational.

As he rounded the corner, he stubbed his toe and cursed in five languages. Glancing down, he made a mental note to have the pile of lances moved out to the armory. He couldn't imagine why they were lying beside the staircase in the first place.

Shaking his head and muttering beneath his breath, he walked the few paces down the corridor and slipped into the garderobe.

* * * * *

Aha! Gwen shouted silently. *Finally!* She dropped down from the stone arch in the corridor. People rarely looked up, and the darkness in the corridor had provided further camouflage. She landed lightly on the balls of her feet, hurried to the hall, and plucked up several steel lances that were piled flush to the wall of the stairs.

Creeping silently back to the door of the garderobe, she braced one end of the steel lance against the stone wall and then gently, oh-so-quietly, wedged it into place. She understood bracing and pressure points with the best of them.

Two, then three, then five—although only two had held the helpful brawny guard just fine. Drustan was a large man, and she wasn't taking any chances that he might crash the door down on her head.

A small giggle built inside her. Trapping the laird of the castle in his own

garderobe appealed to her sense of humor. Then again, the fact that she'd been going without sleep for the past three nights, waiting for him to make a nocturnal journey, probably had a bit to do with it too.

She stepped away from the door and ducked into the Greathall, thinking to give him a few minutes of privacy and time to discover he was locked in and get the worst of it out of his system.

She soon found out she'd woefully underestimated how bad "the worst" would be.

* * * * *

Drustan raked a hand through his hair and fumbled in the dark for the door. When it didn't budge, a part of him was unsurprised. Yet another part of him met the fact with a kind of glad resignation.

She wanted battle? Battle she would get. It would be a pleasure to have it out with her finally. Once he'd ripped the door from the framing, he would exact vengeance upon her wee body with gleeful abandon. No more honorable *I-won't-touch-you-because-I'm-betrothed*.

Nay—he'd touch her. Any damn place and any damn way he wanted to. As many times as he wanted to.

Until she begged and whimpered beneath him.

She'd been trying to drive him mad? Well, he was giving in to it. He would act like the animal she made him feel like being. The hell with Anya, the hell with duty and honor, the hell with discipline.

He needed to tup. Her. Now.

He slammed his body against the door.

It scarce shuddered.

Howling, he flung himself at it again. And again, and again.

It didn't give a hairbreadth. Furious, he slammed his fists on the door above his head. Another shudder, but nothing significant.

He stepped back, eyeing it warily, telling himself he did not feel a bud of respect blossoming. Might the canny wench have wedged braces between the wall and the door, *all* the way up? Christ, he'd never get out! He knew how sturdy the door was, it had been hewn extra thick for privacy.

"Open up!" he roared, pounding it with his fist.

Nothing.

"Lass, if you open up now, I'll leave you in one piece, but I swear to you, if you keep me in here *one more moment* I will tear you limb from wee limb," he threatened.

Silence.

"Lass! Wench! Gwen-do-lynnnnnn!"

* * * * *

Outside the door, Gwen eyed the five lances lodged at varying angles between the door and the stone wall. Nope. No way. He was never getting out of there. Not until she was good and ready.

But it was pretty darned impressive how much the door shuddered each time his body hit it.

"You might have to let him yell himself hoarse, m'dear," Silvan said, leaning over the balustrade.

Gwen tipped her head back. "I'm sorry, Silvan. I didn't mean to wake you."

He grinned, and Gwen realized where Drustan had gotten his mischievous grin. "I wouldn't have missed seeing my son getting barricaded in the privy by a wee lass for anything. Bonny fortune with your plan, m'dear," he said with a smile, then ambled off.

Gwen eyed the shuddering door, then clamped her hands over her ears and sat down to wait him out.

* * * * *

"I brought ye coffee, lass," Nell shouted.

"Thanks, Nell," Gwen shouted back.

They both jumped at the next enraged roar from behind the garderobe door.

"Is that you, Nell?" Drustan thundered.

Nell shrugged. "Aye,'tis me. Bringin' coffee to the lass."

"You're dismissed. Fired. The end. Hie you from my castle. Begone."

Nell rolled her eyes and smiled at Gwen. "Be ye wantin' breakfast, lass?" she said sweetly, loud enough that Drustan could hear it.

Another roar.

* * * * *

By ten o'clock she thought he might soon be ready to talk. He'd threatened, blustered, even tried to sweet-talk her. Then the bribery had begun. He'd let her live if she let him out immediately. He'd give her three horses, two sheep, and a cow. He'd give her a pouch of coin, three horses, two sheep, not just a cow but a milking cow, *and* set her up anywhere in England, if she would just leave his castle and not bother him again for the rest of his life. The only offer/threat that had perked her momentary interest was when he'd shouted that he was going to "toop her'til her bonny legs fell off."

She should be so lucky.

But he'd been silent for fifteen minutes now.

Gwen eyed the door, knowing that she shouldn't instigate their little discussion. It would undermine her position as the one in control. No, *he* had to address her in a reasonable tone first.

And it wasn't long before he said, " 'Tisna verra pleasant in here, lass." He sounded pouty. She smothered a laugh.

" 'Tisna verra pleasant"—she imitated his accent—"out here either. Do you realize I've stayed up for the past three nights waiting for you to go to the bathroom? I was beginning to think you never did."

Growl.

She sighed and pressed her hand against the door, as if to soothe him. Or be closer to him. This was the closest they'd been in days, with only a door between them. "I know it's not very pleasant, but it was the only way I could think of to get you to listen. You escaped your chamber; where else could I trap you?"

"Let me out, and I'll listen to whatever you wish to say," he said quickly. Too quickly.

"I'm not falling for that, Drustan," she said, lowering herself to the stone floor. In a pair of someone's outgrown trews, she crossed her legs comfortably and leaned her back against the door. She'd been wearing them nightly, with a flowing linen shirt, as she'd clung to the stone arch above the garderobe.

"Plenty o' cream, as ye like it, Gwen," Nell said, placing a bowl of porridge, cream, and peaches beside her.

A roar from behind the door. "Are you serving her porridge?"

"'Tis naught of yer concern," Nell replied calmly.

"I'm sorry, Drustan," Gwen said soothingly, "but this is all your fault. If even once you had been willing to sit down and drink some coffee or have breakfast with me and talk, I wouldn't have to be doing this. But time is slipping by and we really need to get some things cleared up. Nell's leaving now, and it's going to be just you and me."

Silence. Stretching, taut.

"What do you want from me, lass?" he finally said wearily.

"What I want is for you to listen. I'm going to tell you everything I can remember about our time together in the future. I've thought about it a lot, and there's got to be something that will make you remember. It's possible that I'm simply missing whatever it is."

She heard a huge sigh from behind the door. "Fine, lass. Let's hear it all this time."

* * * * *

Drustan sat on the floor of the garderobe, his feet stretched out, arms folded over

his chest, his back against the door. He closed his eyes and waited for her to begin. He'd worn himself down raging. Grudgingly, he admired her persistence and resolve. The fit he'd had would have terrified any lass he'd ever known. While he'd raged and flung himself at the door, he pictured her standing outside it, arms folded beneath her lovely breasts, tapping a foot, waiting patiently for him to quiet. Waiting hours—he felt half a day might have passed.

She was formidable.

And by Amergin, a bit too clever to be completely addled.

You know she's not addled, why doona you admit it?

Because if she's not addled, she's telling the truth.

And why does that fash you?

He had no answer for that. He had no idea why the lass turned him into a babbling idiot.

"I'm twenty-five years old," he heard her say through the door.

"That old?" he mocked. "My bride is but five and ten." He smiled when she growled.

"That's called statutory rape in my century," she said with an edge in her voice.

Statutory, he mused. Yet another unclear phrase.

"That means you can go to prison for it," she added.

He snorted. "Why would I care how old you are? Does that have aught to do with your tale?"

"You're getting the long version with a bit of background. Now, hush."

Drustan hushed, finding himself curious what she would tell him.

"I took a vacation to Scotland, without knowing it was a senior citizens' bus tour..."

* * * * *

In time, Drustan relaxed back against the door and listened in silence. He fancied from the sound of her voice that she was seated much the same, back to the door, talking over her shoulder to him.

Which meant, in a way, they were touching, spine to spine. The thought was intimate as he sat in the dark, listening to her voice.

He liked the sound of her voice, he decided. It was low, melodic, firm, and confident. Why hadn't he ever noticed that before? he wondered. That her voice contained a degree of self-assurance that had to have come from somewhere?

Mayhap because whenever she'd spoken to him, he'd been hopelessly distracted by his attraction to her, but now—since he couldn't see her, his other senses were heightened.

Aye, she had a fine voice, and he'd like to hear her sing an old ballad, he thought, or mayhap a lullaby to his children—

He shook his head and focused on her words, not his idiotic thoughts.

* * * * *

Nell silently handed Gwen yet another mug of coffee and slipped away.

"And we drove up the hill to the stones, but your castle was gone. All that was left was the foundation and a few crumbling walls."

"What date did I send you through the stones?"

"September twenty-first—you called it Mabon. The autumnal equinox."

Drustan sucked in a breath. *That* wasn't commonly related in the legends, that the stones could be used only on the solstices and equinoxes.

"And how did I use the stones?" he pressed.

"You're skipping ahead of me," she complained.

"Well, tell me, then go back. How did I use the stones?"

* * * * *

Above her, behind the balustrade, Silvan and Nell sat on the floor, listening. Nell

was flushed from her many dashes from Gwen's side into the kitchen, up the servants' stairs, and around to join Silvan. All quiet as a mouse.

"I doona think you should hear—" Silvan whispered, but cut off abruptly when Nell pressed her mouth to his ear.

"If yer thinkin' I've lived here twelve years and dinna know what ye are, old man, yer dafter than Drustan thinks Gwen is."

Silvan's eyes widened.

"I can read too, ye know," Nell whispered stiffly.

Silvan's eyes grew enormous. "You can?"

"Shh. We're missing it."

* * * * *

"You'd collected paint rocks. You broke them open in the circle and etched formulas and symbols on the inside faces of the thirteen stones."

A chill brushed Drustan's spine.

"Then you drew three more on the slab. And we waited for midnight."

"Och, Christ," Drustan murmured. How could she have knowledge of such things? The legends hinted the stones were used for travel, but no one—save himself, Dageus, and Silvan—knew the how of it. Except now, Gwen Cassidy did.

"Do you recall the symbols?" he asked roughly.

She described several of them to him, and her descriptions, although incomplete, bore enough accuracy to unsettle him deeply.

His mind rejecting it, he floundered for something solid to think about. Something less disturbing. He grinned, striking upon a fine topic. He had no doubt she'd try to change it quickly. "You claimed I took your virginity. When did I make love to you, lass?" he said huskily, turning his mouth toward the door.

Gwen sat on the other side and turned her mouth toward the door. She kissed it,

then felt utterly foolish, but from the sound of his voice, it seemed as if he, too, was sitting with his back to the door. And his voice had sounded closer that time, as if he'd turned his mouth toward hers.

"In the stones, right before we went through."

"Did I know you were a virgin?"

"No," she whispered.

"What?"

"No," she said more loudly.

"You deceived me?"

"No, I just didn't think it was important enough to mention," she said defensively.

"Bullshit. Sometimes not telling the whole truth is the same thing as lying."

Gwen winced, not liking having her own words tossed back in her face. "I was afraid you wouldn't make love to me if you knew," she admitted. *And you were afraid I'd leave you if I knew the truth about you. What a fine pair we were.*

"Why were you still a maiden at twenty and five?"

"I... I just never found the right man."

"And what would the right man be for you, Gwen Cassidy?"

"I hardly think that has anything to do—"

"Surely you can find it in your heart to grant me a few boons, seeing where you've kept me trapped for the day."

"Oh, all right," she said grudgingly. "The right man... let's see, he'd be smart yet playful. He'd have a good heart and be faithful—"

"Faithful is important to you?"

"Very. I don't share. If he's my man, he's mine only."

She could hear a smile in his voice when he said, "Go on."

"Well, he'd like simple things. Like good coffee and good food. A family—"

"You want children?"

"Dozens," she sighed.

"Would you teach them to read and such?"

Gwen drew a deep breath, her eyes misting. Life required a delicate balance. Her own had been painfully unbalanced. She knew exactly what she'd teach her children. "I'd teach them to read and to dream and to look at the stars and wonder. I'd teach them the value of imagination. I'd teach them to play every bit as hard as they worked." She sighed heavily before adding softly, "And I'd teach them that all the brains in the world can't compensate for love."

She heard him draw a harsh breath. He was silent a long time, as if her words had meant much to him. "You truly believe love is the most important thing?"

"I know it is." She'd learned all kinds of lessons in Scotland. A career, success, and critical acclaim—none of it amounted to much of anything without love. It was the necessary ingredient that had been missing all her life.

"How did I make love to you, Gwendolyn Cassidy?"

Gwen's lips parted on a soft moan. The simple words he'd just said had sent heat lancing through her body. He was beginning to sound like her Drustan. This intimate talk was melting her; perhaps it was melting his defenses as well.

"How, Gwen? Tell me how I made love to you. Tell me in much detail."

Wetting her lips, she began, her voice lowering intimately.

* * * * *

Silvan grabbed Nell's hand and tugged.

Nay, she mouthed.

We can't eavesdrop on this, he mouthed back. *'Tis not proper*.

Proper be damned, old man. I'm not leavin'. Her lips were pursed, her gaze

stubborn.

Silvan gaped but, after a few moments, sat back down.

And when Gwen spoke, he found himself ceding her a sort of privacy by imagining it was Nell telling him in such detail how he'd made love to her. At first he kept his chin firmly down, eyes averted, but after a time he stole a surreptitious peek at her.

Nell did not look away.

Brown eyes met blue and held.

His heart pounded.

* * * * *

"And then you said something to me, there at the end, that I'll never forget. You said the sweetest words, and they kind of shivered through me. You said it in that funny voice you have."

"What did I say?" Drustan moved his hand on his cock. His kilt was tossed to the side, his legs spread, palm around his shaft. He was so aroused that he thought he was going to explode. She'd told him in detail how he'd made love to her, and it had been the most erotic experience of his life. Sitting in the dark, watching the images in his mind's eye, he'd felt as if he'd been reliving it. His mind had filled in details she'd not mentioned, details that may have sprung solely from his imagination or from some deeply buried memory. He knew not.

He cared not.

It no longer signified if she was lying or telling the truth. He wanted Gwen Cassidy in a way that defied reason, in a way he refused to further question.

He admired her tenacity; he desired her with every fiber of his being; she made him laugh, she made him furious. She stood her ground; she believed him a Druid and desired him anyway.

By Amergin, he—thrice-jilted Drustan MacKeltar—was being pursued by a woman who knew what he was.

He could no longer recall why he'd ever resisted her to begin with.

He struggled against an intense desire to bring himself to completion, to find release—a release he'd desperately needed since the moment she'd entered his home. But, nay, not in so empty a fashion. He wanted it with her. Inside her.

"What you said was so romantic," she said with a little sigh.

"Um-hmm," he managed. When she spoke again, it took him a few moments to realize what she was saying.

And when he did, he leaped to his feet, roaring, but she kept speaking: "If aught must be lost, 'twill be my honor for yours. If one must be forsaken, 'twill be my soul for yours. Should death come anon, 'twill be my life for yours. I am Given. That's what you said."

As she finished, Drustan doubled over. A spark of heat and light built inside him and spread, enveloping him. He couldn't talk, he could scarce breathe, as wave after wave of emotion crashed over him...

* * * * *

Gwen doubled over, as a wave of intense emotion crashed over her. She felt funny, really weird, like she'd just said something irrevocable...

* * * * *

"Och, Christ, Nellie," Silvan whispered, stunned both by Gwen's words and by the realization that he was holding Nell's hand, and she was *letting* him. "She just married him."

"Married?" Nell's fingers tightened on his.

"Aye, the Druid vows. I didn't work that spell, even when I wed my wife."

Nell's lips parted on a "why," but then they both peeked breathlessly over the balustrade, desperate to hear what would happen next.

Chapter 21

"*Ahem*," Drustan said after a long time. "Do you know you just married me, lass?"

"What?" Gwen shouted.

"Would you please let your *husband* out of the garderobe?"

Gwen was stunned. She'd married him with those words?

"Those were the Druid wedding vows you just said to me, a binding spell, and I doona understand how you knew it, but—"

God, he still didn't remember! she realized with a sinking sensation, even though she'd told him all of it, down to the minute details. "I knew it, you dolt, because you said it to me! And I didn't *know* I was marrying you—"

"Doona be thinkin' you'll be gettin' out of it," he said testily.

"I'm not trying to get out of it—"

"You're not?" he exclaimed.

"You *want* to be married to me? Without even remembering?"

"'Tis too late. We are. Nothing can undo it. Best you grow accustomed to it." He punched the door for emphasis.

"What about your betrothed?"

He muttered something about his betrothed that warmed her heart. "But that's another thing I doona understand, lass. If what you claimed happened did indeed happen, I doona understand why I wouldn't have woven a spell for you to carry to me. I would have known the possibility existed that I might not make it back. I would surely have given you a memory spell."

"A m-m-memory sp-spell?" Gwen sputtered. Could it have been that simple all along? Did she have the key to make him remember, but he'd not told her how to use it? What hadn't she told him so far? She'd deliberately withheld a few details

so she might have something to test him with should he suddenly claim to have regained total recall. Closing her eyes, she thought hard, sifting through details. Oh!

Have you a good memory, Gwen Cassidy? he'd asked her in the car as they'd approached *Ban Drochaid*. "Oh, God. Like something that rhymed?" she shrieked.

"It may have."

"If you'd given me such a spell, would you have told me how to use it?" she said accusingly.

There was a long silence, then he admitted, "Like as not, I wouldn't have told you until the last possible moment."

"And if at the last possible moment you melted?" she pressed.

There was a harsh intake of air, then an extended silence behind the door. Then, "Speak your rhyme if you have one!" he exclaimed.

She turned around and faced the door, then laid her palms and cheek against it. Quietly but clearly, she spoke.

* * * * *

Drustan was facing the door, his palms spread against the cool wood, his cheek pressed to it. He'd whispered the Druid wedding vows back the moment she'd said them. There was no way she was getting away from him now. His former betrothal meant naught. He was well and truly wed. Druid binding vows could never be broken. There was no such thing as Druid divorce.

He braced himself, waiting for her words, hoping and fearing.

Her melodic voice carried clearly through the door. And as she spoke, the words shivered through him, mixing past and future with a cosmic mortar and pestle.

"Wither thou goest, there goest I, two flames sparked from but one ember; both forward and backward doth time fly, wither thou art, remember."

He hit the floor doubled over, clutching his head.

Och, Christ, he thought, *my head will surely split*. It felt as if he were being ripped in two, or *had* been ripped in two and some unseen force was trying to crush two parts back together again.

It was purest instinct to fight it.

Words from a dream place buffeted him: *You don't trust me*.

I do trust you, wee lass. I am trusting you far more than you know. But he wasn't. He was afraid he'd lose her.

Then images:

Another flash of those blue trews, a naked Gwen beneath him, above him. A crimson scrap of ribbon in his teeth. The white bridge.

You would fight me to the death. The counterfeit's lips moved soundlessly. *I see. I see now why only one lives. 'Tis not nature which is innately indifferent, but our own fear that causes us to destroy each other. I beg you, accept me. Let us both be*.

I will never accept you, Drustan roared.

He'd fought, viciously and victoriously.

Let us both be.

Drustan drew upon his Druid will, forcing himself to relax his defenses, forcing himself to submit.

Love her, the counterfeit whispered.

"Och, Gwen," Drustan breathed. "Love *Gwen*."

* * * * *

Gwen eyed the door warily. There'd not been a sound from behind it since the moment she'd said the rhyme.

Worried, she scratched at the door. "Drustan?" she asked nervously.

There was a long silence.

"Drustan, are you okay?"

"Gwen, lass, open this door this very instant," he ordered. He sounded winded, out of breath.

"You have to answer some questions first," she hedged, wanting to know exactly who would be stepping out of the garderobe. "What was the name of the store —"

"Barrett's," he said impatiently.

"What did you want me to buy you in the store to wear?"

"I wanted purple trews and a purple shirt and you gave me a black T-shirt and black trews and hard white shoes. I didn't fit in your blue trews and you threatened to help me fit with my sword." His voice deepened smugly. "But I recall your threats ceased once I kissed you thoroughly. You became quite the amenable lass after that."

She blushed, remembering exactly how wantonly she'd responded to his kiss. A tremor of excitement raced through her. He was *her* Drustan again! "So what was the saleslady's name in Barrett's? The bitchy, unattractive one," she added, wrinkling her nose.

"Truth be told, I haven't the veriest, lass. I had eyes for only you."

Oh, *God*, what a great answer!

"Open the bletherin' door!"

Tears misted her eyes as she leaped up to hit the top lance and knock it loose. It clattered to the floor, followed by the second one.

"And what was I wearing when you made love to me?" she said, kicking the third and fourth out of the way, still unable to believe that she had him back.

"When I made love to you?" he purred through the door. "Nothing. But before that you wore tan trews cut off at the thigh, a chemise cut off at the waist, boots named Timberland, socks named Polo Sport, and a red ribbon I—"

She yanked the door open. "Removed with your teeth and tongue," she cried.

"Gwendolyn!" He crushed her in his arms and kissed her, a deep soul kiss that seared her all the way down to her toes.

When Gwen wrapped her arms around his neck, he cupped his hands beneath her bottom and lifted her, pulling her legs about his waist. She locked her ankles behind him. He was *never* getting away from her again.

"You want me, lass. Me. Knowing all that I am," he said incredulously.

"Always will," she mumbled against his mouth.

He laughed exultantly.

Their coming together was not a gentle thing. She tugged at his kilt, he tore at her trews, clothing flew this way and that, until, gasping for breath between kisses, they both stood naked near the staircase in the Greathall. Gwen glanced up at him, eyes widening, breath coming in short pants, as she belatedly realized where they were. Then her gaze drifted over his incredible body, and she forgot not only where she was but what century she was in. There was nothing but him.

Silvery eyes glittering, he grabbed her hand, tugged her down the corridor into the buttery, slammed the door shut with a kick, and flattened her up against the wall, leaving their clothing strewn about the hall.

Gwen pressed her palms against his muscular chest and sighed with pleasure. She couldn't get enough of touching him. During the time he'd not known her, it had been the worst sort of torture, looking at him every day, unable to caress and kiss him. She had a lot of lost time to make up for, and began by tracing her hands up over his shoulders, down his back, skimming to his muscular hips. His skin was velvet over steel, he smelled of man and spice and every woman's fantasy.

"Ah, God, I missed you, lass." He took her mouth roughly, hands bracketing her face, kissing her so deeply that she couldn't breathe, until he filled her lungs with his own breath.

"I missed you too," she whimpered.

"I'm so sorry, Gwen," he whispered, "for not believing you—"

"Apologize later. Kiss now!"

His laughter rolled erotic and rich in the dark buttery. He pushed her back atop sacks of grain and lowered himself over her, suspending his weight on his forearms. And he kissed her. Slow, intensely intimate kisses, and mad rushes of deep kisses. She drank him in as if he were the air she needed to survive.

Melting back against the sacks, she moaned when his muscular thigh slid between her legs. He traced hot, wet kisses down her neck, over her collarbones, across her shoulders. She wrapped her legs around his, rubbing against him wantonly, savoring the slick slide of him.

Drustan gazed down at her, marveling. She was so beautiful; her cheeks flushed, her eyes stormy with passion, her lips half parted on a soft gasp. She was his soul mate, smart, lovely, and tenacious. He would love her to his dying breath, and beyond if such was possible for a Druid and his mate. He would show her with his body all the things he felt for her, and mayhap she would murmur those tender words he'd so longed to hear back in the circle of stones when she'd given him her virginity.

She whimpered when he rasped his unshaven jaw against her nipples. She arched up, hungry for more. He shifted his body so the thick, hot length of him rested between her thighs, moving his hips in slow, even thrusts.

Then he pulled back, driving her mad, and proceeded to taste her from head to toe.

Starting at her toes.

Gwen tossed her head back in ecstasy. Long, velvety strokes of his tongue on her calves and ankles. Bending her legs, he traced silky kisses on the backs of her knees. Wet, hungry kisses on her thighs, teasing flickers against the sensitive skin where her hip met her leg.

Then deep, warm, wet kisses where she needed him the most. Lapping and nibbling, his hands glided up her body to tease her nipples as he kissed and tasted her until she shuddered against his mouth, arching her hips up for more.

Resonance built to an exquisite peak, and she shattered, crying his name.

While she was still resonating with tiny tremors, he rolled her over and ran his tongue down her spine to the hollow where her back met her hips. Then kissed and tasted and nipped every inch of her bottom. Kneading, plumping, caressing, dangerously near the hottest part of her. But not quite there. She was going to die if he didn't get inside her, she thought, gritting her teeth. She burned, she ached for want of him.

Slipping his hand between her and the sacks, he palmed her woman's mound and pulled her back against him, resting the heavy ridge of his cock in the deft of her bottom. As he rubbed against her lush softness, he caught her tiny nub with his fingers, flicking lightly back and forth.

He savored the tiny cries she made, the soft pants and breathy moans, listened intently to discover just what touch elicited each sound, then played her again and again, bringing her dangerously near the peak—

—then denying for the pleasure of hearing her cries grow wilder, of feeling her hips buck back against him, of seeing such evidence of her desire. She knew what he was, and *still* wanted him with such hunger. It was more than he'd ever dreamed of having. If only she would say the words, those three simple words he longed to hear... Aye, he was a warrior, he was strong and manly, but, by Amergin, he *wanted* those words. He'd passed a lifetime believing a woman might never say them to him.

"Drustan!" she cried. "Please."

I love you, he thought, willing her to hear it. Willing her to say it. He traced a finger over her taut nub before slipping it inside her. He dosed his eyes and groaned as she clenched around him. When she bucked back against him wildly, the last vestige of his control snapped. He became mindless with need. Wrapping his hands around her waist, he thrust into her in one sleek motion.

She sobbed with pleasure, begged him not to stop, then murmured something so raggedly that he nearly missed it.

But nay, he would not let such words slip by him!

Trembling, he stopped mid-stroke and whispered hoarsely, "*What* did you just say?"

"I said 'don't stop'," Gwen whimpered, pressing back against him.

"Not that—the other thing you just said," he demanded.

Gwen went still. It had slipped out without conscious thought—an impassioned declaration of her feelings—God, how she loved him! She, Gwen Cassidy, was utterly and deliriously in love. She spoke quietly, savoring the warmth of her feelings, putting every ounce of her heart and soul into the words. "I love you, Drustan."

Braced on his elbows, Drustan swayed, the words hit him with such impact. "Say it again," he breathed.

"I love you," she repeated softly.

He sucked in a harsh breath and was silent a long while, relishing her words. "Ah, Gwen, my lovely wee Gwen, I thought I might ne'er hear such words." He lifted her hair away from her face and kissed her temple tenderly. "I love you. I adore you. I will cherish you all the days of my life," he vowed. "I knew even back in your century that you were the one for me, the one I'd longed for all my life."

Gwen dosed her eyes, treasuring the moment, hugging his words to her.

When he moved again, thrusting into her yielding warmth, she arched back to meet him. Moving his hips, entering her slow and deep, he tipped her face to the side and kissed her with the same tempo. Increasing the pace, never breaking the kiss...

It was a mating of raw need and mindless melding. As if they could somehow crawl inside each other if they got close enough.

He thrust; she screamed. She clenched; he roared.

He slid his hands up her body and cupped her breasts, pulling her back against him as he drove inside her. The buttery was filled with sounds of passion, scented with the erotic musk of man and woman and sex.

When she peaked again, he exploded, crying her name.

* * * * *

He kept her in the buttry nigh as long as she'd kept him in the garderobe. Unable to stop touching her, loving her. Unable to believe that it had all worked out, that she'd indeed cared for him in her century, that she'd given him back the binding vows, that even though he'd failed to give her full instructions, she'd tenaciously persevered. Unable to comprehend that Gwen loved him for exactly what he was. Needing to roll it over and over in his mind as if savoring the finest brandy.

He made her tell him again and again as he reacquainted himself with every inch of her luscious body.

It was full night before he poked a cautious head out, retrieved their clothing, then swept her into his arms and carried her up to his bed.

Where she would sleep each night, he vowed, till the end of forever.

Chapter 22

Besseta Alexander sat motionless, one hand clutching her yew sticks, the other her Bible. She grimaced at her own foolishness. She knew which one was more useful, and it wasn't the fat tome.

She'd had her vision again. Nevin, blood dripping from his lips, the woman weeping, Drustan MacKeltar scowling, and that fourth nameless presence who seemed also to be troubled by her son's death.

What could one old woman do to defy fate? How could she, with too many years on her bones and too little vigor in her veins, avert the impending tragedy?

Nevin wouldn't heed her pleas. She'd begged him to give up his post and return to Edinburgh, but he'd refused. She'd pretended to be grievously ill, but he'd seen through her ploys. Sometimes she wondered that the lad had sprung from her loins, so implacable was his faith in God, so resistant was he to her "sight."

He'd forced a promise from her that she would not harm Drustan MacKeltar. In truth, she didn't wish to harm anyone. She only wanted her son alive. But she'd begun to realize that she was going to have to harm someone or lose Nevin.

She sat rocking for time uncounted as morning slipped away into afternoon and blended with gloaming, fighting the yawning darkness in her mind.

It was full twilight, the Highlands alive with the hum of frogs and soft hooting of owls, when she heard bells jingling, voices shouting, and the thunder of horses approaching the cottage.

Besseta pushed herself from her chair, scurried to the door, and opened it a crack.

When she saw the gypsy caravan, she closed it to a hairbreadth, for the wild gypsies frightened her. She counted ten and seven wagons in the caravan, gaily decorated and pulled by prancing horses draped in silks. They thundered past, toward Balanoch.

Nevin had told her some time ago that the gypsies camped each summer near the MacKeltar estate, where they hosted a trading fair in Balanoch, told fortunes,

and mingled with the village folk. There would be wild dancing and bonfires and, next year, babes with dark eyes and skin.

Besseta shuddered, dosed the door, and leaned against it.

But as a possibility slowly took shape in her mind, she struggled to rise above her fears. With the gypsies' dark arts, she could remove the threat without harming anyone. Well... not *really* harming anyone. The Rom sold powerful spells and enchantments cheek by jowl with their more ordinary wares. They cost dearly, but she knew where to find an illuminated gold-leafed tome that would more than cover the price for anything she sought. The longer she considered it, the more appealing the solution seemed. If she paid the gypsies to enchant the laird, she wouldn't really be harming him; she would just be... suspending him. Indefinitely. So that Nevin might live out his life in safety and peace.

It would mean she would have to seek those wild creatures out, brave their bawdy, sinful camp, but for her beloved Nevin, she would brave anything.

* * * * *

Silvan and Nell had fled their perch the moment Gwen released Drustan from the garderobe.

Nell hadn't needed to wait around to see what was going to happen next. During Drustan and Gwen's intimate talk, she'd been surprised the door itself hadn't gone up in flames.

She'd followed Silvan in a blind dash to his tower, where they'd collapsed on his bed, huffing and sorely out of breath from their mad race up the hundred stairs.

When her heart finally stopped pounding, she realized, with much consternation, where she perched. On the laird's bed! Next to him! She tensed to move away.

With strong hands on her waist, he caught her before she could flee and turned her face toward his with a firm hand beneath her chin. His eyes were brimming with emotion as he searched her gaze. Deep in their brown depths, tiny golden flecks glittered. She couldn't look away for anything. She gazed at him mutely.

Then slowly, so slowly that he gave her a thousand lifetimes to turn away, he lowered his lips toward hers.

Nell's breath hitched in her throat. It had been twelve years since she'd kissed a man. Did she even recall how?

"It has been long since I last kissed a lass, Nellie," he said huskily, as if sensing her fears. "I beg you be patient. You might need to remind me of the finer nuances."

Her breath came out in a sudden rush, ending in a small moan. His admission dashed her fears. In all her years at Castle Keltar, she'd not once seen Silvan woo a woman. She'd thought he was simply discreet about his manly needs, mayhap went to the village to satisfy his urges, but was it possible he'd been as alone as she had? She wanted to ask how long but couldn't bring herself to voice the question. No matter, for he read it in her eyes.

"Since my wife died, Nellie."

She gasped.

"Would you kiss such an untried man?" he asked softly.

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

His first brush was soft and tentative, much how she felt. And he didn't try to plunge right in, nay, Silvan kissed her as if she were made of fine china. Kissed her lips, brushing back and forth, kissed her nose, her chin, then her lips again. Kissed the corners of her mouth.

Then pulled away and regarded her soberly.

She tried a tentative smile.

His second kiss was warm and encouraging. By the third touch of his lips to hers, a part of her she'd thought dead was dancing a Scottish reel. And remembering how to kiss as if she'd never stopped. *He* certainly hadn't forgotten!

His fifth was deep and hungry with passion.

When he finally broke that kiss—she couldn't have for anything—he drew back and said softly, "Och, Nellie, there is a question I've been wishing to ask you. And if I am prying, well, then prying I'll be. 'Tis long past time we spoke freely with each other. Would you tell me, sweet lass, what on earth happened to you

the night I found you?"

When tears misted her eyes, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

"There, lass," he whispered. "I've been a damn fool for far too long. So many things I should have said, but I was... afraid."

"Afraid?" Nell whispered incredulously. "What might Silvan MacKeltar fear?"

"Och, the possibilities were endless, the fears myriad. That I couldn't make all your hurt go away. That I might make a fankle of things with you, and you'd leave, and my lads loved you so. That you might think me strange—"

"Ye *are* strange, Silvan," Nell said seriously.

He sighed. "That you wouldn't love me, Nellie."

Words she couldn't bring herself to say trembled on her lips. Words that frightened her, words that would make her heart vulnerable again.

So she offered those words to him silently by pressing her lips to his, hoping they might roll off in the kiss and find their way into his heart.

* * * * *

Dozens of candles shimmered in the laird's bedchamber.

Drustan had made love to her yet another time, so many times, she'd lost count. Gwen's body felt deliciously swollen by kisses and thorough loving from head to toe. In the candlelight, his dark skin shimmered golden, his silky black hair gleamed. She gazed at him, marveling. She had *her* Drustan back. She still couldn't believe it.

"You really meant it when you said you were going to'toop me until my legs fell off,' didn't you?" she teased, wondering if she would be able to walk by morning.

"By Amergin, Gwen, it was killing me watching you walk around the castle! I was obsessed with you. As much as you spied on me, I watched you. And had you stopped, I like as not would have begun stalking you instead."

"A shame I didn't stop, then. I was getting rather sick of humiliating myself."

He winced and stretched himself atop her, propping his weight on his elbows. Smoothing a wisp of hair behind her ear, he whispered, "Och, lass, forgive me."

"For what? Being a stubborn medieval man and refusing to believe me right away?" she teased.

"Aye, for that and many other things," he said sadly. "For not preparing you better. For being afraid to trust you fully—"

"I understand why you didn't," she cut him off gently. "Nell told me about your three betrotheds. She said they were frightened of you, and I realized the reason you didn't confide in me was that you thought I'd leave you."

"I should have believed better of you."

"For heaven's sake," she protested, "you'd just woken up to find yourself five centuries in the future. Besides," she admitted, "it wasn't as if I trusted you either. I tend to hide my intelligence. If I'd been more honest, you might have been too."

"Never hide it from me," he said softly. "'Tis one of the many things I adore about you. But, Gwen, there is more for which I must seek your forgiveness."

"Marrying me without telling me?" she said lightly. "Have you any idea how flattered I am? We're *really* married?" she pressed. "Could we get married in a church too? Formally, with a long dress and everything?"

"Och, we're more married than the church could do, but aye, lass. I should like a church wedding," he agreed. "You'll wear a gown fit for a queen, and I'll wear the full Keltar regalia. We'll feast for days, invite the whole village. 'Twill be the celebration of the century." He paused, his silvery eyes flickering with shadows. "But there's still something more for which I must seek your forgiveness. There is the small matter of me abducting you and trapping you in my century."

She trailed her fingers lovingly down his chiseled jaw, then slipped her hands into his silky hair, grazing his scalp with her nails. They were nearly touching nose to nose, and his hair fell about her face, framing it. She tipped her head back for a quick kiss. Then two and three.

"Do you know," she murmured a few minutes later, "when you performed your

ritual in the stones, at first I thought you had gone back to your century and left me behind in mine. I was furious. I was so hurt that you had left me. I thought you had begun to care for me—"

"I did!" he exclaimed. "I do!"

"My point is that if you'd told me everything that night in the stones, and had asked me to come back to the sixteenth century, I *would* have. I wanted to be with you wherever or even whenever that had to be."

"You doona hate me for not being able to return you?" He paused for emphasis. "Ever, Gwen. I can't return you ever."

"I don't want to go back. We belong together. I felt it the moment I met you, and it terrified me. I kept trying to find excuses to leave you but couldn't make myself go. I felt as if fate had brought us together because we were supposed to be together."

His smile flashed white in his dark face. "I felt the same way. I began falling in love with you the moment I saw you, and the more I learned about you, the more intense my feelings grew. That night in the stones when you gifted me with your maidenhead, when I gave you the Druid vows, I realized I would rather have a single night with you—even if it meant I was doomed to be bound to you, aching for you forever—than not know such love. I swore that if I were given the chance to have a life with you, I would treat you as befits a queen. That I would devote my life to making it up to you, what I'd taken from you. And I meant it, Gwen. Anything you want, anything at all... you have but to say."

"Love me, Drustan, just love me, and I'll not want for anything."

* * * * *

Later she said, "*Why* can't you go through the stones? You said they could never be used for personal reasons. What do you use them for?"

He told her, withholding nothing. The entire history, back to his ancestors, the Druids who'd served the *Tuatha de Danaan*, and about the war, and how the Keltar were chosen to atone and protect on behalf of all the Druids who'd scarred Gaea.

"The last time the stones were used, we sent two fleets of Temple Knights,

carrying the Holy Grail, twenty years to the future so they might hide it away again."

"Did you say the *Holy Grail*?" Gwen squeaked.

"Aye. We protect. It would have been a war to end all wars had the king of France, Philip the Fair, gotten his hands on it."

"Oh, God," Gwen breathed.

"The stones may be used only for the greater good of the world. Never for one man's purpose."

"I understand." She paused a moment, then forced herself to go on. "I had to face a similar kind of situation once."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Tell me. I want to know everything about you."

She rolled onto her side, and he stretched out on his, facing her. Their foreheads touched on the downy pillow, golden hair tangled with black silk. He laced their hands together, palm to palm. She told him all of it, which she'd never told another living soul. She confessed to her Great Fit of Rebellion.

There had been a time when, like her parents, she'd adored doing research. The pressure of their expectations had not seemed such a burden to her then. From the time she'd been able to talk, they'd made it clear that they expected her to be their greatest achievement, with a genius that would surpass theirs and enhance their reputation.

And until she was twenty-three, she'd toed the line they'd dearly defined. Her love of learning, of stretching her imagination to the furthest possible limit, had seemed adequate compensation for a strange childhood. She thrived on the rush of excitement whenever she discovered an alternative way of looking at things. And for a glorious time in her adolescence, she basked in her parents' approval and committed to joining them at Los Alamos and working by their side one day.

But as she'd grown older and learned more, she realized the danger of certain knowledge. And one night, as she'd worked in the lab, she had a terrifying realization. For years she'd been playing around with a set of theories, working toward a hypothesis that—if it held water—would change the way the world

viewed everything.

Her parents had been delighted with her progress, demanding constant updates, pushing her harder and harder.

So engrossed had Gwen been in proving her hypothesis—for the sheer joy of proving it—that she hadn't given thought to all the possible ramifications until it had been nearly too late. In a moment of blinding clarity, she suddenly glimpsed all the potentials should she complete her work.

The fundamentals of it would make possible weapons to exceed all weapons. Infinite possibilities, not just to destroy the earth but to alter the very fabric of the universe. Too much power for man to own.

Late that very night, the lab at Triton Corp. caught fire.

Everything was destroyed.

The fire chief and arson investigator spent weeks picking through the rubble before writing it up as accidental, despite the unfathomable heat that had caused the foundation to explode.

There'd been too many chemicals stored on site to prove anything, and the burn patterns had been oddly random. A veritable *study* of randomness, her father had observed coldly when she'd informed him that all her research had gone up in flames and she'd failed to keep back-up Zip disks in the safety box at the bank as he'd taught her.

Five days later Gwen quit school and moved out into her own barren little apartment. Her father had refused to let her take so much as one piece of furniture.

She'd never looked back.

"I set fire to the lab I'd been working in and burned everything. I dropped out of my parents' world and took a job settling... er, disputes."

His eyes were glittering when she finished. He was stunned by what she'd just confided. Doubly stunned that fate had brought him such a woman who was his match in every way. Intelligence, passion, honor, courage to defy and do what

she knew was right.

What children they would have, what a life they would have!

"I am proud of you, Gwen," he said quietly.

She smiled radiantly. "Thank you! I *knew* you'd understand. And that's why I understand about the stones."

They kissed slowly and passionately, as if they had all the time in the world. Then Drustan said softly, "'Tis said that if a Keltar should use the stones for his own selfish reasons, the souls of the lost Druids—the evil ones who died in the battle—wait to take possession of such a fool. That they're trapped in a kind of in-between place, neither dead nor living. I know naught if it's true, nor dare I chance it. To reawaken such violence, such madness and rage—" He broke off. "There is much about Druidry even we doona understand. We doona tamper with the unknown. When Dageus died in the other reality, I could not break my oaths." He blinked and looked startled. "Dageus," he muttered, pushing himself up.

Gwen sat up with him. "He's alive, remember? You sent two hundred guards with him."

He rubbed his forehead. "Och,'tis damn odd having two realities in here. I can see why the mind instinctively resists it. I hold all the grief of him dying yet the awareness that he hasn't." He blew out a breath, frowning. "Yet."

Gwen searched his eyes. "You're worried about him."

"Nay," he said swiftly, "I have my beloved wife—"

"You're worried about him," she said dryly.

He raked a hand through his hair.

"Has the battle happened yet? You never told me what date he died."

"Two days hence. The second day of August."

"Could you get there by then?" she pressed.

He nodded, clearly torn. "But only if I ride without pause."

"Then go. Bring him safely home, Drustan," she said softly. "I'll be fine here. I can't bear to think that he might die if you're not there. Go."

"You dismiss me from your bed so soon?" he growled teasingly, but she glimpsed a brush of vulnerability in his eyes. She marveled that such an intelligent, attractive, passionate, sexy man could suffer insecurity.

"No. If it were up to me, I'd never let you go, but I know that if Dageus doesn't come home safely, I'll hate myself. We have time. We have the rest of our lives," she said, smiling.

"Aye, that we do." He stretched himself over her, suspending his weight on his palms, and kissed her with only their lips touching. Long and slow and delicious. The hot silk of his tongue swirled languidly against hers.

When he sat back, he was grinning.

"What?"

"Anya. I can both secure my brother's safety and tidy up that bit of business. No lass of five and ten will tolerate 'magic' well. I will induce her to break the betrothal, bring my brother home, and toop you till you can't move. For a sennight, nay, a fortnight—"

"You will come back, love me, then we'll get down to figuring out who plans to abduct you, because we still have a big problem, you know," Gwen corrected him as a chill of concern marred her dreamy contentment. She was so elated to have her Drustan back, had been so lost in their lovemaking that the danger he was in had completely slipped her mind. She pulled the coverlet about her waist and sat cross-legged, facing him. "Who abducted you, Drustan? Do you remember anything at all?"

His silvery eyes darkened. "I told you all I could recall about the abduction in your century. I never glimpsed my abductors. By the time I neared the clearing, whatever drug they'd given me had rendered me nearly unconscious. I couldn't even open my eyes. I heard voices but couldn't identify them."

"Then the first order on the agenda is that I will personally prepare all your food

and drink for the next month," Gwen announced.

He arched a brow. "I doona think I care to let you out of my bed that long."

"There's no way you're drinking or eating a thing that hasn't either been prepared by me or sampled by someone first."

"There's an idea," he mused. "After all, 'twas only a drug, not a poison. Our guards have been known to serve such a function in times of danger."

"I asked Silvan who might wish to harm you. He said you have no enemies. Can you think of anyone?"

Drustan pondered her question. "Nay. The only possibility I can think of is if someone thought to steal our lore, but that still doesn't explain why someone would enchant me. Why wouldn't they have killed me? Why make me slumber?" He shook his head. "I thought that once I got back here, I would see some hint of the threat. But still I can't imagine who it might be."

"Well, when the message comes, you won't go. We can send the guards to the clearing. What day were you abducted?"

"The seventeenth day of August. A fortnight after Dageus was..." He trailed off, his concern etched on his face.

"Go now," she urged. He looked so worried. "We can talk about it more when you return. Go bring your brother home. Silvan and I will put our heads together and list some possible suspects while you're gone, then when you and Dageus return, we'll figure it out."

"I doona wish to leave you."

Gwen sighed. She didn't want him leaving her either. She'd only just gotten him back again. But she knew that if she had a brother, and if her brother had died in some other reality, she'd need to be there to make certain he didn't die this time. She couldn't bear it if anything went wrong. Drustan needed to be there, and he needed her to encourage him to go.

"You must," she insisted. "I can't ride well enough yet, and I'd slow you down. You might not make it in time if you take me."

Raking a hand through his hair, he slipped from the bed, looking impossibly torn. His gaze swept over her; her skin flushed from lovemaking, lips swollen from kisses. She sat cross-legged amid the violet velvet coverlets, a creamy goddess rising from a purple sea. "A lovelier vision I've ne'er seen," he said huskily.

Gwen beamed at her magnificent Highlander.

"I'll be back, lass. I'd bid you doona move a muscle so I could find you looking just the same, but I fear it will be four or five days before I return."

"It might take me four or five days to start walking right again," she said, blushing.

He flashed her a grin of pure male satisfaction, dressed swiftly, kissed her a dozen times, then slipped from the chamber.

Then poked his head back in. "I love you, Gwen."

Gwen fell back on the bed, sighing dreamily. Love. Gwen Cassidy had a heart and was loved.

"Say it," he said anxiously.

She laughed delightedly. "I love you too, Drustan." His neediness about hearing the words was adorable. Her Highland hunk had such a charming vulnerability.

He smiled brilliantly and was gone.

* * * * *

In Drustan's absence, Gwen, Silvan, and Nell listed potential suspects: all the occupants of the castle, certain questionable personages from the village of Balanoch,

Drustan's ex-betrotheds, and several neighboring clans. After much discussion, each was ticked off for lack of a possible motive.

"Is it possible the Campbell had anything to do with it?" Gwen asked. "Because they killed Dageus in the other reality," she clarified.

Silvan shook his head. "I doona see those two events being related, m'dear. Colin

Campbell has ne'er come against us, and his holdings are vast enough that even now he has difficulty protecting his territory. Besides, there's the issue of enchantment. 'Twould take another Druid or a witch to do such a thing. The Campbell have no such arts."

Gwen sighed. "So what are we going to do?"

"The only thing we can do—take all precautions. We'll triple the guard rotations. I'll send them out combing the countryside. And we'll wait. Now that we know there is a threat, it shouldn't be too difficult to avert. Drustan will go nowhere unaccompanied. Robert, our captain of the guard, will serve as his taster."

"And in the meantime," Nell said, taking Gwen's hand, "we women-folk will set our minds to happier things, mayhap select the room ye wish to use when ye have wee bairn."

Silvan turned a beatific gaze upon them. Gwen didn't miss the way his gaze lingered overlong on Nell. Nor did she miss the heated glance that passed between them.

Hmmm, she thought. Seems they finally came to their senses, without my help.

She might have been mortified had she known just *how* she'd helped them.

"Aye, now, there's a sound plan," Silvan said. "And rest easy, m'dear. We'll avert the threat."

For the next few days, Gwen immersed herself in plans for the future. Drustan was a strong man, smart, and his castle well fortified. Now that they were aware of the impending threat, they would indeed unmask the enemy, and life would be all she'd ever dreamed it might be.

Chapter 23

Besseta's eyes were dark with terror as she watched the MacKeltar guard thunder past the cottage. The news she'd overheard in Balanoch earlier today was true! The guards were returning with Drustan's betrothed! She hadn't even known they'd ridden out to fetch her—thanks to Nevin's refusal to discuss the goings-on at the castle.

Now *she* had arrived—the woman who would kill her son!

Trembling, Besseta crept away from the window and nearer the fire. She rubbed her hands together, trying in vain to dismiss a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. The chill was in her heart, ne'er to be thawed lest she secure her son's future.

She'd bartered for the gypsies' services several days earlier, but, unaware that the laird's betrothed was arriving so soon—more of Nevin's fault for being so close-lipped—she'd not specified the date for Drustan's abduction. She'd planned to use herbs to drug the laird, then lure him to the loch where, helpless, he would be enchanted. Now she had a better idea. She would go to the gypsy camp this very night and instruct them to act immediately, take his betrothed, use her as lure, then enchant them both.

She snatched up her cloak in trembling fingers and hurried to the door. Nevin was still at the castle and would be for several hours if he stayed true to his schedule. Utterly oblivious to danger all around him.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, clutching the door and steeling her will. It was almost over. Just one more day, brave the gypsy camp one more time, and her son would be safe.

And mayhap, just mayhap, that horrible sucking darkness would finally leave her alone.

* * * * *

The evening Drustan returned, Gwen, Silvan, and Nell, alerted by the guard that rode ahead, waited on the front steps of the castle.

Gwen felt her heart might burst from happiness. Her gaze lingered long on the two magnificent men, talking, clapping each other on the shoulder, and jesting as they dismounted and the stable master led their horses away. *She'd* had a part in that, she thought, smiling. First goal accomplished. Drustan's brother was safe.

When Drustan reached the bottom step, she flung herself into his arms.

He swung her up into his embrace and kissed her hungrily. By the time he'd finished, she was gasping for air and laughing.

"My turn?" Dageus teased.

"I doona think so," Drustan growled. Then his scowl faded and he smiled at his brother. "By Amergin, 'tis like a dream. I still recall standing in her century, mourning you, brother. Have a care with yourself. I never want to suffer that again. I expect you to live a hundred years or more."

"I plan to," Dageus assured him. Then he smiled at Gwen, and she caught her breath. For a moment, she thought him nearly as gorgeous as Drustan. Those lion-like golden eyes of his...

She glanced up at Drustan, who had arched a brow, watching her.

"Oh, come on," Gwen said lightly. "I can't possibly not notice how attractive he is, as much as he looks like you."

Drustan rumbled deep in his throat.

"But I married *you*," she said pertly.

"Aye, that you did, lass. That she did, Dageus," Drustan said pointedly.

"Doona be getting yourself in a fankle," Dageus said lightly. "'Tis plain her heart is only for you. If you'll recall, she didn't care for my kiss."

Drustan growled again.

Dageus laughed. "'Tis thanking you I am, Gwen Cassidy. Drustan tells me he regained his memory when you said the spell. The battle occurred as you predicted. 'Twould seem I owe you my life."

"No," Gwen protested. "I'm happy I could help, and glad you're all right."

"'Tis an old custom. I shall always protect you and yours," he said, his golden eyes glittering. "And there is the small fact that you have made my brother happier than I've ever seen him, so I'm thanking you doubly, lass. Welcome to our family."

Gwen's eyes misted. She was part of a family now. Drustan's arms tightened and he swung her legs up, cradling her. She tipped her head back for another leisurely kiss.

Dageus grinned and shook his head, turning to greet his father. He paused, noticing Silvan's arm about Nell's waist.

Drustan noticed at the same time. His eyes widened and he glanced at Gwen.

She shrugged, smiling. "I don't know what happened, but ever since you left, they've been acting different. It seems they finally admitted their feelings to each other."

Dageus tossed his head back and gave a whoop of joy. He grabbed Nell and kissed her soundly on the mouth. Nell flushed, looking immensely relieved, and Gwen realized she must have been nervous about how Drustan and Dageus might feel about her relationship with their father.

"Stop that," Silvan growled. "Kiss her cheek if you wish, but doona be kissing those lips. They're mine."

Nell's laughter was joyous, and she and Gwen exchanged a purely feminine smile. Possessiveness in tiny doses could be delicious.

Dageus grinned. "So, our dolt of a da has finally opened his eyes."

Silvan looked sheepish.

Dageus plucked Nell up and twirled her around in dizzying circles. "'Tis long past time you took your seat at our table, Nell."

"I take it this means you approve," Silvan said dryly.

"Oh, aye, we approve," Dageus and Drustan said simultaneously.

When Dageus deposited Nell near Silvan, only Gwen noticed the faint hint of sadness in Dageus's eyes, buried deep behind the golden glitter. She might not have noticed it at all had she not experienced it herself.

It was loneliness.

Where would Dageus MacKeltar, brother to a man who'd been jilted four times

"You *did* break the betrothal, didn't you?" She tipped her head back at Drustan, narrowing her eyes.

"Aye, seems Anya didn't care for me calling down a storm during battle," he said, grinning.

—Druid extraordinaire, gorgeous beyond words, find a woman to wed him in all of Alba?

And Dageus knew it, although Drustan hadn't realized it yet.

"Did he make his eyes glow and everything?" she teased, eyeing Dageus thoughtfully.

"It was most impressive," Dageus informed her. "You should have seen him raise his arms to the sky and make quite a performance of it, when in truth it doesn't require much effort—an arrow with the right elements shot into a certain cloud formation."

"Oh, you must tell me," Gwen breathed.

They both laughed, tossing similar manes of silky dark hair.

"I didn't call down a storm. I told her that if she broke our betrothal, she could retain the bride-price to use as a future dowry." He grimaced. "It seems she didn't wish to wed me anyway, she'd been pining for another. She said her da gave her no choice, as they had need of coin."

Oh, Drustan, Gwen thought. Doomed never to be appreciated by the women in his century. And Dageus! There were going to be some serious matchmaking efforts in her future. Where on earth would she find him a wife? she wondered.

Then she wondered no more, for Drustan turned with her in his arms and loped up the stairs into the castle. To make immediate, passionate love to her, she was quite certain, and her entire body quickened with anticipation.

"Wait!" Silvan called after them. "I thought we could dine together as a family."

"Give over, Da. I doubt they'll be leaving the bedchamber till morn," Dageus said dryly.

Silvan sighed, then glanced at Nell. His gaze grew heated.

When Silvan took Nell's hand and hastened her toward the stairs, bidding a good night over his shoulder to his son, Dageus shook his head, smiling faintly, and withdrew a flask of whisky from his sporran.

Dageus sat on the steps for a long time, filled with a strange restlessness that even whisky couldn't mellow, watching the night sky twinkle with a smattering of brilliant stars.

If he felt lonely, in the vastness of things, 'twas a feeling to which he'd grown long accustomed.

* * * * *

Gwen welcomed her husband home in a time-honored fashion. They spent the evening in their chamber, where she lovingly bathed the dust of travel from him, then joined him in a fresh bath and showed him how very much she'd missed him.

They lit candles and drew the velvet bedcurtains, alternately making love and stopping to feed each other tidbits from a scrumptious dinner delivered personally by Dageus.

It was clear from the array of foods, Gwen decided, that Dageus had quite the erotic mind, just like his brother. For he'd brought them lovers' food: juicy slices of peaches and plums, baked meat tarts, cheese, and a crusty loaf of bread. He'd also brought honey, with nothing specific to put it on, a thing she'd not understood until Drustan laid her back upon the bed, drizzled a dab on that most feminine part of her, then proceeded to show her just how long it could take to lick it off. Thoroughly.

She'd peaked twice beneath his masterful, slightly sticky tongue.

Then there were cherries from the orchard, and she'd eaten a handful while trying her own hand at the honey.

Drustan had lain supine upon the bed for all of two and a half minutes before flipping her over on her back and taking charge of matters. She'd reveled in eroding his control. For such a disciplined man, he certainly came undone in bed. Uninhibited, passionate, his enthusiasm for sex was endless.

She'd fed him slices of roast pig, then given him small drinks of wine from her own lips. And when he'd whispered to her the same base, primitive words back that she'd said to him their first night together in the stones, untamed lust had consumed them both.

They'd rolled across the bed and tumbled to the floor, knocking over tables and candles and setting fire to the lambskin rug. They'd laughed and Drustan had doused it with the cooling bathwater.

And when she finally slept—spooned, her back to his front—with Drustan's arms around her, her last thought was *heaven*. She'd found heaven in the Highlands of Scotland.

Chapter 24

"*Mmm.*" Gwen sighed contentedly. She'd been having a marvelous dream in which Drustan was waking her by making love to her. Dimly, the realization penetrated—at the same moment he did—that it was no dream.

She gasped as, still spooned, he slipped into her from behind.

"Oh, God," she breathed as he increased the tempo. Deeper, harder, faster. He thrust into her, his arms wrapped tightly around her, and nipped the skin at the base of her neck. When he rolled her nipples between his fingers, she arched back against him, meeting his every thrust until they peaked in perfect harmony.

"Gwen, my love," he whispered.

When, later, he'd gone to fetch breakfast, intent on serving her in bed, she lay back, a silly smile plastered on her face.

Life was *so* good.

* * * * *

Whistling a cheery tune, Drustan balanced a tray laden with kippers and plump sausages, tatties and clootie dumplings, peaches and porridge, on his arm as he fumbled with the door. All had been prepared by Nell herself, all tasted by Robert.

Despite the fact that the threat loomed some distance yet in the future, he was taking no chances with his wife.

"Sustenance is here, and you're going to need it, love," he announced, pushing the door open.

The velvet bedcurtains were tied back, revealing a tangle of coverlets and linens, but the bed was empty. He glanced about the room, puzzled. He'd been gone a scant half hour, gathering food. Where had she gone? A quick visit to the garderobe? He had a delicious morning planned: a leisurely breakfast, a leisurely bath for his wife, who must be aching from so much bed play. More lovemaking only if she was able, if not, he would massage scented oils into her skin and gently minister to her tender limbs.

A chill of foreboding kissed his spine as he eyed the empty bed. Dropping the tray on a table near the door, he walked swiftly through the boudoir and into the Silver Chamber.

She wasn't there.

He pivoted and stalked back to his chamber.

Only then did he see the parchment propped on the table near the fire. His hands shook as he snatched it up and read it.

Come to the clearing by the wee loch if ye value her life. Alone, or the lass dies.

"Nay!" he roared, crushing the parchment in his fist. *'Tis too soon*, his mind protested. He wasn't supposed to be enchanted for nearly a fortnight! He hadn't even given the guards instructions to triple the watches and scour the countryside!

"By Amergin," he whispered hoarsely, "we've changed things somehow." By preventing Dageus's death, they must have altered the way subsequent events would unfold. His mind raced furiously. Who was behind it all? It made no sense to him. And what might the enemy want with Gwen?

"To get to *me*," he muttered grimly. They hadn't drugged him this time. Rather—because Gwen was there—she'd been used as bait.

Frantically, he crammed his feet into his boots and grabbed his leather bands, strapping them on. In the Greathall, he stuffed blade after blade into the slits as he raced to the garrison.

Alone, my arse, he thought.

I'll walk in alone, while my men sneak up behind them and destroy every last one of the bastards who took my woman.

* * * * *

Besseta cowered behind the lofty oak, watching the gypsies prepare to work the spell she'd commissioned. They'd painted a large crimson circle upon the ground. Runes she did not recognize marked the perimeter—dark gypsy magic, she thought, shivering.

The moment Nevin had departed for his morning stroll to the castle, she'd hastened from the cottage and crept through the forest. She was determined to see the deed done with her own eyes. Only then would she believe her son safe.

She narrowed her eyes, peering at her enemy—Drustan's betrothed, who'd been plucked straight from his bed, she was fair certain, for the lass wore naught but a sheer nightrail. Soon the laird himself would arrive, the gypsies would enchant him and take him far away, to be interred underground, and her worries would be over. The gypsies had demanded extra coin to enchant the woman as well, forcing Besseta to pilfer from Nevin's charity box. But no transgression was too great to save her son.

* * * * *

A few yards away Nevin watched his mother with a heavy heart. For some time, she'd been worsening, her moods growing increasingly erratic, her eyes too bright. She watched him ceaselessly as if she feared a bolt of lightning might strike him at any moment. He'd done all he could to allay her fears that Drustan MacKeltar might harm him, but to no avail. She was lost in terrible imaginings.

He murmured a soft prayer of thanks to God for guiding him. He'd awakened with a niggling foreboding, and rather than immediately striking out for the castle, he'd lingered behind the cottage. Sure enough, moments later, his mother had slipped out, wild-eyed, her hair mussed, half-dressed, pulling her cloak tightly about her.

When she'd scurried off, he'd followed at a distance. She'd crept to the edge of the forest, where it opened into a circular clearing at the edge of the small loch. Now he watched, deeply uneasy. What was his mother doing? What involvement had she in gypsy affairs, and what strange designs were etched upon the sod?

He scanned the clearing, stiffening when a small group of gypsies moved apart and one broke away from the rest, carrying a bound woman toward the crimson circle. It was the wee blond lass Nevin had seen about the castle of late. When the gypsy briefly glanced in his direction, Nevin ducked deeper into the brush, deeper into the shadows of the forest.

What ominous events transpired? Why did his mother lurk here, and why was a woman from the castle bound? What terrible things had Besseta gotten herself ensnared in?

Smoothing his robes, he reminded himself that he was a man of God, and as such had a duty to work in His name despite his slight stature and mild nature. Whatever was about to happen, it was clear no good might come of it. It was his responsibility to put a stop to it before someone was harmed. He began to step forth from his hidden vantage, but no sooner did he stand than Drustan MacKeltar, mounted on a snorting black stallion, burst into the clearing. He vaulted from his horse and, unsheathing his sword, stalked toward the gypsy carrying the lass.

"Release her," Drustan roared savagely in a voice that sounded like a thousand voices. His silvery eyes blazed incandescently. 'Twas no normal voice, Nevin realized, but a voice of power.

Nevin ducked back again, blinking.

The gypsy carrying the blond lass dropped her as if burned and backed away toward the loch. The lass tumbled and rolled across the rocky sod, stopping a few yards from where Nevin stood.

And that was when all hell broke loose.

* * * * *

Besseta keened low and long as chaos erupted in the clearing. She wiped clammy palms on her skirt and watched in horror as mounted guards burst from the forest.

The gypsies, hemmed in by the loch at their back and guards on all sides, reached for their weapons.

Wrong, wrong, it was all going wrong!

She inched from the cover of the forest, creeping unnoticed in the tumult, toward the wagon that had been brought to cart off the laird's slumbering body.

The gypsies were aiming their crossbows.

The guards were raising shields and swinging swords.

Men were going to die and blood was going to flow,

Besseta thought, grateful that Nevin was safely in the castle working on his

chapel. Mayhap rather than being enchanted, Drustan MacKeltar would be killed in battle. Not by her hand at all. Mayhap.

But mayhap was too weak a possibility to ensure her son's safety.

I will not harm the MacKeltar, she'd promised Nevin, and she was a woman of her word. If a son couldn't trust his mother's word, what could he rely upon?

She'd carefully planned the enchantment so that not one hair on the laird's head would be harmed. But now all her cautious plans were going awry. She had no choice but to try another option to save her son. If she could not remove Drustan MacKeltar before he wed his lady—well, she'd made no promises about that lady. And that lady was currently forgotten as the battle raged around her bound body.

Lying on the ground, she may or may not get trampled by the horses. May or may not get struck by a stray arrow.

Besseta was quite finished taking chances. *If* Drustan survived the battle, Besseta had to make certain there was no woman for him to wed.

She narrowed her eyes, watching the lass struggle with her bonds, and inched nearer the wagon.

With trembling hands, she plucked up a tightly strung crossbow and, summoning every ounce of her strength, leveled it at the lass.

* * * * *

Nevin's eyes widened in horror. His mother, his own mother would do murder! She was truly lost in her madness! *Thou shah not kill!*

"Nay!" he roared, plunging from the brush.

Besseta heard him and started. Her hand slipped on the cord.

"Nay! Mother!" Running, he catapulted himself through the air to shield the bound lass, and stumbled, landing sideways atop her. "*Naaaa—*"

His cry terminated abruptly as the arrow slammed into his chest.

* * * * *

Besseta froze. Her world grew eerily still. The tumult in the clearing receded and grew hazy, as if she stood in a dreamy tunnel, she at one end, her dying son at the other. Choking on a horrified sob, her knees buckled and she collapsed.

Her vision swept over her again, this time in full, and she finally saw the fourth person's face. The person she'd thought had meant naught since she'd been unable to see it clearly.

She'd not been able to see the fourth person because it had been herself.

She was the woman who would kill her son. It had never been the lass. Och, indirectly, in a way, for had the lass not come, Besseta would not have planned to abduct the laird, and had she not set such plans into motion, she would never have shot her beloved son.

God's will will be, Nevin had said a thousand times if once.

But, trusting her visions more than God, she'd tried to change what she thought she'd seen and had brought about the very event she'd tried so desperately to avoid.

She fancied she could hear her son's ragged, dying breaths over the din of battle.

Oblivious to the warfare all around her, the arrows flying, the swords swinging, she crawled to her son's side and tugged him onto her lap. "Och, my wee laddie," she crooned, smoothing his hair, stroking his face. "Nevin, my baby, my boy."

* * * * *

Gwen struggled to sit up the moment she was no longer pinned by the man's body. A sob escaped her when she spied the arrow protruding from his bloody chest.

She'd never seen anyone shot before. It was horrible, worse than the movies made it seem. She tried to inch away, but her wrists were bound behind her, her ankles tightly tied. Scooting awkwardly on her behind was painstakingly slow going. When a horse screamed and reared behind her, when she heard the chilling *swish of a* blade slicing through the air, she went utterly still, and decided moving might not be the wisest course of action.

Drustan had been gone only a few minutes when the gypsies had slipped into the

chamber and taken her captive. They'd subdued her with humiliating ease.

She hadn't seen it coming, but somehow, by preventing Dageus's death, they'd changed things. Plans had been accelerated, and rather than a message bidding Drustan to come if he wished to know the name of the man who'd killed his brother, *she'd* been used as the lure.

She stared at the weeping old woman, whose frantic, gnarled hands fluttered above the man's cheeks and brow. As Gwen watched, his chest rose and fell, then did not rise again.

"'Twas me all along," Besseta wailed. "'Twas my vision that did this. I should ne'er have bargained with the gypsies!"

"*You* arranged to enchant Drustan?" Gwen gasped. This gray-haired old woman with arthritic hands and rheumy eyes was their unknown enemy? "You're the one behind everything?" But the old woman didn't reply, merely stared at Gwen with loathing and madness in her gaze.

"Gwen!" Drustan roared. "Get away from Besseta!"

Gwen's head snapped back, and she saw him running toward her, a horrified expression on his face.

"Crawl, get away!" he roared again, dodging swords and ducking arrows.

"Stay back," Gwen screamed. "Protect yourself!" He would never make it through so many weapons.

But he didn't stay back, he kept running, heedless of the danger.

He was no more than a dozen yards from her when an arrow slammed into his chest, taking him off his feet. As he collapsed on his back, suddenly she was...

...on the flat rock, sunning herself, in the foothills above Loch Ness.

"Noooooooo!" she screamed. "Drustan!"

*"The release of atom power has changed
everything except our way of thinking...
the solution to this problem lies in the heart
of mankind. If only I had known, I should
have become a watchmaker."
—ALBERT EINSTEIN*

*"The heart has its reasons—of which
reason knows nothing."
—BLAISE PASCAL*

Chapter 25

Gwen lay on the flat rock for time uncounted.

She was mindless, wracked with grief. When a sip of reality finally returned, it couched an impossible pill to swallow—reality without him. Forever.

How had she—the brilliant physicist—failed to see it coming?

How could she have been so stupid?

She'd been so thrilled to remain with Drustan in the sixteenth century, so lost in dreamy plans of their future, that her brain had gone on strike, and she'd failed to take one critically important factor into account: The moment she changed his future, she would change her own.

In the *new* future they'd created, Drustan MacKeltar was not enchanted. Was not buried in the cavern for her to find.

And so—in this new future they'd created—because

Drustan was not enchanted, she'd not found him, *and he'd never sent her back to him.*

At the precise moment the possibility of him being enchanted had reached absolute null, Gwen Cassidy had ceased to exist in his century. Reality had plunked her right back where she'd been before she'd fallen down the ravine. Right back *when* she'd been. No need for the white bridge. Sixteenth-century reality had spat her out, rejecting her very existence. An unacceptable anomaly. Drustan was never enchanted—hence she had no right to exist in his time. So much for the theories that claimed Stephen Hawking was wrong for advocating the existence of a cosmic censor that would prevent paradoxes from piling up. There was clearly some force keeping things aligned in the universe. God *abhors a naked singularity*, Gwen thought with a half-snort that quickly translated into a sob.

She clutched her head, suddenly fearing her memories might melt away.

But no, the scientist reminded her, the arrows of time remembered forward, and

so her memory would remain intact. She *had* been in the past, and the memory of it was etched into the essence of her being.

How had she failed to realize that by saving him, she would lose him forever? Now, looking back, she couldn't believe she'd not once thought through to what the inevitable finale would have to be. Love had blinded her, and in retrospect she realized that she hadn't *wanted* to think about what might happen. She'd studiously blocked thinking about anything to do with physics, busy savoring the simple joy of being a woman in love.

"No," she cried. "How am I supposed to live without him?"

Tears slipped down her cheeks. She scanned the rocky terrain, seeking the ravine down which she'd tumbled, but even that was gone. There was no longer a crevice splitting the northeast face of the foothills. The gypsies must have had some part in creating it, she realized, perhaps lowered him though it, who knew?

What she did know was that even if she dug beneath the mountain of rubble upon which she perched, she would find no sleeping Highlander beneath it.

"No!" she cried again.

Yes, the scientist whispered. *He's five hundred years dead.*

"He'll come through the stones for me," she insisted.

But he wouldn't. And she didn't need the scientist to point that out. He *couldn't*. Even if he had survived the arrow wound, he would never use the stones. It would be like someone saying to her, "If you finish your research, create the ultimate weapon and unleash it upon an unsuspecting world, you can have Drustan back."

She could never release such capacity for evil, no matter the enduring grief.

Nor would he. His honor, one of the many things she loved about him, would keep them forever apart.

If he'd even survived.

Gwen dropped her head against the rock, scooped her pack into her arms, and clutched it tightly. She might never know if he died from the arrow wound, but if

he hadn't died in battle, he'd still died nearly five hundred years ago. Grief smothered her, grief more intense than anything she'd ever imagined. She buried her face in the pack and wept.

* * * * *

It was hours before she managed to force herself up from the rocks and hike down to the village. Hours in which she sobbed as if her heart would break.

Once in the village, she'd gone to her room and checked in but wasn't able to bear being alone, so she'd walked numbly down to the inn's cozy restaurant, hoping to find Beatrice and Bertie. Not to talk—she could hardly talk about it—but to be buffered by their warm presence.

Now, standing in the doorway of the dining room, she blinked as she glanced around the brightly lit interior. *I will not start crying again*, Gwen told herself fiercely. She would weep later, after she'd returned home to Sante Fe. She would fall apart there.

The restaurant felt strange and modern to her after having been in the sixteenth century. The small fireplace on the south wall of the dining room seemed miniature compared to medieval hearths, the neon bar decorations garish after weeks of soft candlelight and oil globes. The dozens of tables, topped with vases of fresh wildflowers, seemed too small to seat guests with any degree of comfort. The modern world felt impersonal to her now, with everything churned out in mass, uniform shapes and styles.

Her gaze drifted over a cigarette vending machine in the corner. Dimly, she realized she'd passed through the worst of withdrawal in the sixteenth century.

Still, she felt an utterly self-destructive urge wash over her.

Her gaze was drawn to a yellowed calendar that hung behind the cash register. *September 19.*

It was the same day she'd left. But of course, she thought. No time *would* have passed. Perhaps a mere few moments had slipped by in the twenty-first century while she'd lived the happiest days of her life in sixteenth-century Scotland.

She sniffed, perilously close to tears again. Glancing around, thinking Bert's rainbow ensemble should be easy to spot, she nearly missed the lone silver-

haired woman huddled in one of the booths that lined a bank of windows, silhouetted against the gathering twilight. The gloaming cast Beatrice's complexion in bruised shadows, and Gwen was struck by how old she looked. Her shoulders were hunched, her eyes closed. Her wide-brimmed hat was crushed between her hands. As a car drove by outside the bank of windows, headlights illuminated the elderly woman's face, revealing the shiny trails of tears on her cheeks.

Oh, God—Beatrice weeping? Why?

Stricken, Gwen rushed to the booth. What could make cheerful Beatrice weep, and where was Bertie? From what Gwen knew of the love-struck couple, the only way Bert would leave Bea's side was if he was physically incapable of being there. A chill brushed her neck.

"Beatrice?" she said faintly.

Beatrice jerked, startled. The eyes she raised to Gwen's were red-rimmed from crying, deep with grief.

"No," Gwen breathed. "Tell me nothing has happened to Bert," she insisted. "Tell me!" Suddenly limp, she slumped into the booth across from Beatrice and took the older woman's hand in hers. "Please," she begged.

"Oh, Gwen. My Bertie's in the hospital." The admission brought on a fresh bout of tears. Plucking another napkin from the dispenser, Beatrice wiped her eyes, blew her nose, then deposited the wadded napkin atop a substantial pile.

"What happened? He was fine just... er, this morning," Gwen protested, having a difficult time keeping the date straight.

"He seemed fine to me too. We'd been shopping all morning after you left, laughing and having a fine time. He was even feeling... frisky," she said with a pained smile. "Then it happened. He went absolutely still and just stood there with the most startled and angry look on his face." Beatrice's eyes filled with more tears as she relived the moment. "When he clutched his chest, I knew." She wiped impatiently at her cheeks. "The damn man never takes care of himself. Wouldn't get his cholesterol checked, wouldn't get his blood pressure tested. A few days ago, I'd finally managed to wring a promise from him that once we got

back home, he'd get a complete physical—" She broke off, wincing.

"But he's alive, right?" Gwen asked faintly. "Tell me he's alive." She couldn't bear any more tragedy today. Not one more ounce.

"He's alive, but he had a stroke," Beatrice whispered. "Although they've stabilized him, they don't know how much damage was done. He's still unconscious. I'm going back to the hospital in a few minutes. The nurses insisted I get a breath of fresh air." She flushed. "I couldn't stop crying. I guess I was pretty loud and the doctor was getting upset with me. I thought I'd get some soup and tea before I went back for the night, so here I am." She waved a hand at the plastic container of soup and sandwich-to-go.

"Oh, Beatrice, I'm so sorry," Gwen breathed. "I don't know what to say." Tears she'd been holding back slipped down her cheeks; tears for Drustan, and now tears for Bea and Bertie.

"Dearie, are you crying for me? Oh, Gwen!" Slipping over to Gwen's side of the booth, she hugged her, and they clung to each other for a long time.

And something inside Gwen broke.

Wrapped in Beatrice's motherly arms, the pain of it all crashed over her. How unfair to love so deeply and lose. How unfair life was! Beatrice had only just found her Bert, much as Gwen had only just found Drustan. And now, were they both to suffer endlessly for losing them?

"Better not to love," Gwen whispered bitterly.

"No," Beatrice chided gently. "Never think that. Better to love and lose. The old adage is true. If I never had another moment with my Bertie, I would still feel blessed. These past months with him have given me more love and passion than some people ever know. Besides," she said, "he's going to be all right. If I have to sit by his bed and hold his hand and yell at him until he gets better, then tote his ornery butt to the doctor every week, and learn how to cook without fat or butter or a damn thing worth eating, I'll do it. I am *not* letting that man get away from me." She fisted her ring-bedecked hand and shook it at the ceiling. "You can't have him yet. He's mine still."

A bit of laughter escaped Gwen, mingled with fresh tears. If only it were so easy

for her, if only she could fight for her man the way Beatrice could fight for hers. But hers was five centuries dead.

She became aware, after a moment, that Beatrice was regarding her intently. The older woman cupped Gwen's shoulders and searched her gaze.

"Oh, dearie, what is it? It looks to me as if you might be having a problem of your own," she fretted.

Gwen tucked her bangs behind her ear and averted her gaze. "It's nothing," she said hastily.

"Don't try to put me off," Beatrice chided. "Bertie would tell you there's no point once I set my mind on a thing. It's not only my problem with Bertie that's made you cry."

"Really," Gwen protested. "You have enough problems—"

"So take my mind off them for a moment, if you will," Beatrice pressed. "Grief shared is grief lessened. What happened to you today? Did you find your, er... cherry picker?" Beatrice's blue eyes twinkled just a bit, and Gwen marveled that the older woman could still sparkle at such a moment.

Had she found her cherry picker? She fought a bubble of nearly hysterical laughter. How could she tell Beatrice that she'd lived almost a month in a single day? Or at least she thought she had. It was so strange coming down from the foothills to find that no time at all had passed, she was beginning to fear for her sanity.

Yet Beatrice was right: Grief shared was grief lessened. She *wanted* to talk about him. Needed to talk about him. How could she possibly confide her pain... unless...

"It's really nothing," she lied weakly. "How about if I tell you a story instead, to take your mind off things?"

"A story?" Bea's eyebrows disappeared beneath her silvery curls.

"Yes, I've been thinking about trying my hand at writing," Gwen said, "and I've been kicking around a story, but I'm stumped on the ending."

Beatrice's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "A story, you say. Yes, I'd like to hear it, and maybe you and I will be able to figure out how the ending should go."

Gwen took a deep breath and began: "Okay, the heroine is a girl who was hiking in the foothills of Scotland, and she found an enchanted Highlander sleeping in a cave above Loch Ness... pretty far out there, huh?"

* * * * *

An hour later, Gwen watched Beatrice open her mouth several times, then close it again. She fussed with her curls, fiddled with her hat, then smoothed her pink sweater.

"At first I thought you were going to tell me something that happened to you today, that you didn't want to own up to." Beatrice shook her head. "But, Gwen, I had no idea you had such an imagination. You truly took my mind off my worries for a time. Goodness," she exclaimed, waving at the plastic containers, "long enough that I ate when I was certain I wouldn't be able to force a bite down. Dearie, you *must* finish this story. You can't just leave the hero and heroine hanging like that. I can't *stand* it. Tell me the end."

"What if there is no end, Bea? What if that's all of it? What if she got sent back to her time and he died and that's it?" Gwen said numbly.

"You can't write such a story. Find a way to bring him through the stones."

"He can't," Gwen said flatly. "Ever. Even if he lived—"

"Oaths are a lot of nonsense when love's at stake," Beatrice insisted. "Bend the rules. Just write that rule out."

"I can't. It's part of the story. He would become a dark Druid if he did." And Gwen understood how awful that would be better than most ever could. "Not one of his clan has ever broken the oath. They must not. And in truth, I'm afraid I would think less of him if he did."

Beatrice arched a brow. "You? *You* might think less of him?"

Gwen shook her head sheepishly, "I meant my heroine in the story. She might think less of him. He was perfect the way he was. He was a man of honor who knew his responsibilities, and that was one of the things she loved about him. If

he broke his oath and used the stones for personal reasons, he would corrupt the power within him. There's no telling how evil he would become. No. If he lived—which I greatly doubt—he will never come through the stones for her."

"*You're* the storyteller. Don't let him die," Beatrice protested. "Fix this story, Gwen," she said sternly. "How dare you tell me such a sad story?"

Gwen met her gaze levelly. "What if it's not just a story?" she said softly.

Beatrice studied her a moment, then glanced out the window into the twilight. Her gaze shifted from left to right, over Loch Ness in the distance. Then she smiled faintly. "There's magic in these hills. I've felt it ever since we arrived. As if the natural laws of the universe don't quite apply to this country." She paused and glanced back at Gwen. "When my Bertie gets better, I might just take him up into the hills myself, under a good doctor's care of course, and rent a small cottage for the rest of the fall. Let some of that magic soak into his old bones."

Gwen smiled sadly. "Speaking of Bertie, I'll walk you back to the hospital. Let's go see what the doctors can tell us. And if you need to cry, I'll do the talking." Although Beatrice put up a token protest, Gwen didn't miss the relief and gratitude in her eyes.

Gwen was relieved too, because she suspected she might not be able to bear being alone for quite some time.

* * * * *

Gwen spent the rest of her holiday in the village by the deep glassy loch with Beatrice, never looking up into the foothills, never venturing forth from the village, never allowing herself to even consider going to see if Castle Keltar still stood. She was too raw, the pain too fresh. While Beatrice visited Bertie at the hospital, Gwen huddled beneath the covers, feeling feverish with grief. The prospect of returning home to her empty little apartment in Santa Fe was more than she could bear to contemplate.

When Beatrice returned in the evenings, exhausted by her own worries, they comforted each other, forced each other to eat something healthy, and took slow walks beside the huge silvery mirror of Loch Ness and watched the setting sun paint the silvery surface crimson and lavender.

And beneath the wild Scottish sky, Gwen and Beatrice bonded like mother and daughter. They tossed around her "story" on more than one occasion. Beatrice urged her to write it down, to turn it into a historical romance and send it into a publisher.

Gwen demurred. *It would never get published. It's way too far out there.*

That's not true, Beatrice had argued. I read a vampire romance this summer that I adored. A vampire, of all things! The world needs more love stones. What do you think I read when I'm sitting in the hospital, waiting to see if my Bertie will ever be able to speak again? Not some horror story...

Maybe one day, Gwen had conceded, mostly to end the conversation.

But she was beginning to consider it. If she couldn't have the happily-ever-after in real life, at least she could write it. Someone else could live it for a few hours.

Despite her relentless grief, she refused to leave Beatrice's side until Bert was stable and Beatrice in better spirits. Day by day, Bert grew stronger. Gwen was convinced he was healing from the sheer magnitude and depth of Beatrice's love for him.

The day he was released, Gwen accompanied Beatrice to the hospital. His speech was impeded because the left side of his face was paralyzed, but the doctor said that in time and with therapy he might regain considerable ground. Beatrice had said with a wink that she didn't care if he could ever speak clearly again, as long as all the other parts were in good working order.

Bert had laughed and written on his erasable memo board that they certainly were, and he'd be happy to demonstrate if everyone would quit fussing over him and leave him alone with his sexy wife.

Gwen had smiled and watched with a mixture of joy and pain, as Beatrice and Bert rejoiced in each other.

Only after they'd wrung a promise from her that she would visit them in Maine for Christmas—Beatrice had indeed rented a lovely cottage on the Loch for the fall—did Beatrice help Gwen pack up and tuck her into a cab for the ride to the airport.

As Gwen settled into the backseat, Beatrice shifted her ample bulk into the door and hugged her fiercely, kissing her forehead, nose, and cheeks. Both were misty-eyed.

"Don't you dare give up, Gwen Cassidy. Don't you dare stop loving. I may never know what happened to you that day up in the hills, but I know it was something that changed your life. There's magic in Scotland, but always remember: A heart that loves makes magic of its own."

Gwen shivered. "I love you, Beatrice. And you take good care of Bertie," she added fiercely.

"Oh, I plan to," Beatrice assured her. "And I love you too." Beatrice stepped back as the driver closed the door.

Once the cab pulled away from the curb, and she'd watched Beatrice until she was a small pink-clad speck in the distance, then gone, Gwen cried all the way to the airport.

October 20, Present Day

Chapter 26

Although Gwen had known by the age of four that objects derive color from their innate chemical structure—which absorbs certain wavelengths of light and reflects others—she now understood that the soul had a light of its own that colored the world too.

It was an essential light, the light of joy, of wonder, of hope.

Without it, the world was dark. Didn't matter how many lights she turned on, everything was flat, gray, empty. Sleeping, she dreamed of him, her Highland lover. Waking, she lost him all over again.

Most days she hurt too much even to open her eyes.

So she stayed in bed in her tiny apartment, drapes pulled, lights off, phone unplugged, reliving every moment they'd spent together, alternately laughing and crying. On rare occasions, she tried to persuade herself to get out of bed. Short of bathroom jaunts to attend a queasy stomach, or stumbling to the door to pay the pizza guy, it wasn't working.

She was mortally wounded, but her stupid heart kept pumping.

How was she supposed to live without him?

She'd been deceived by platitudes and clichés. Time did *not* heal all wounds. Time didn't do a damn thing. Truth was, time had stolen her lover away, and if she lived to be a hundred—heaven forbid she suffer *that* long—she'd never forgive time.

That's silly, the scientist sniffed.

Gwen groaned, rolling over on her side and pulling a pillow over her head. *Leave me alone. You've never been any help to me. You didn't even warn me that saving him would make me lose him.*

I tried to. You didn't want to hear me. And I'm trying to help you now, the scientist said stiffly. *You need to get up.*

Go away.

You'd better get up, unless you want to sleep in that three-day-old slice of pizza you just ate.

Well, that was one way out of bed, a shaking Gwen decided a few moments later as she weakly brushed her teeth. Seemed to be the only way she got up lately. Squinting, she braced herself before turning on the light so she could see to wipe off the toilet. The light hurt her eyes and it took her several moments to adjust. When she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she gasped.

She looked awful. Her hair was dull and tangled, her skin pale, her eyes red and swollen from crying. Her face looked gaunt, her eyes defeated.

She really needed to get herself together, she thought dimly.

If not for you, then for the child, the scientist agreed.

"Wh-what?" Her voice, so long unused, cracked, and the word escaped in a hoarse, disbelieving croak.

Child. The child, you idiot, the scientist snapped.

Gwen gaped, stunned, staring at her reflection. She peered at herself a long while, brows furrowed.

Shouldn't her skin look radiant or something if she was pregnant? Shouldn't she have gained a little weight? She glanced dubiously down at her flat stomach. Flatter than it had ever been in her life. She'd definitely *lost* weight, not gained.

Don't tell me you can't do the math. When's the last time we had our period?

Gwen felt a tiny bud of hope blossom in her heart.

She squelched it firmly. A dangerous feeling: hope. No way—she was not going that route. She'd hope she was pregnant, only to be doubly crushed when she found out it wasn't true. It would destroy her. She was in bad enough shape already.

She shook her head bitterly. The scientist was wrong this time. "I'm not pregnant," she told her reflection flatly. "I'm depressed. Big big difference." It

was simply stress making her period late, nothing more. It had happened before. During her Great Fit of Rebellion, she'd skipped two periods.

Fine. So crawl back in bed, keep eating stale pizza, and refuse to wonder why you've been getting sick. Blame it all on stress. And when you lose our baby because you won't take care of yourself don't blame me.

"Lose our baby!" she gasped. Fear knifed through her and her eyes flew wide. If there was even a remote possibility that she had a child of Drustan's inside her, there was no way she was losing it. And afraid though she was to hope—because of how awful the potential disappointment might be—she acknowledged that there was more than a possibility. There was a probability. They'd made love repeatedly, and she was not on birth control. If she hadn't been so lost in misery, she might have considered it sooner. If she was pregnant and did anything to jeopardize the baby, she would just die.

Stricken, she stumbled back into the bedroom, turned on the light, and took a good look around, thinking hard. Counting days, looking for dues.

Her bedroom was a pigsty. Pizza boxes, with half-eaten slices dotted the floor. Glasses with milk-encrusted bottoms were forgotten atop the bed table. Cracker wrappers were strewn across the bed: crackers she'd been nibbling in the morning to calm her queasy stomach.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. "Oh, please, oh, please let it be true."

* * * * *

The wait to discover if she was pregnant was interminable.

No at-home pregnancy test for Gwen Cassidy—she needed to hear whatever news it was directly from a doctor.

After giving both a urine and blood sample, Gwen tapped her foot and sat tensely in the crowded waiting room of her doctor's office. She felt wired from head to toe. She shifted position a dozen times, changed chairs, fanned through every magazine in the office. She paced. Periodically made sure the receptionist knew she was still alive.

The receptionist scowled each time she passed by, and Gwen suspected the woman thought she was mildly unbalanced. When Gwen had called earlier,

nearly hysterical, insisting on seeing the doctor immediately, the receptionist had brusquely informed her that Dr. Carolyn Devore had no openings for several weeks.

Gwen had pleaded and sobbed until finally the frustrated receptionist had put Carolyn on the phone. Her dear, wonderful doctor since childhood, who'd become a friend over the years, had squeezed her in.

"Sit," the receptionist snapped, exasperated, as Gwen paced by again. "You're making the other patients nervous."

Mortified, Gwen glanced around at the roomful of people and slunk back to her chair.

"Ms. Cassidy?" A nurse poked her head around the corner.

"That's me!" She shot back up and trotted after the nurse. "That's me," she informed the receptionist brightly.

A few moments later, she took a seat on the examining table. Hugging herself in the chilly room, she sat, feet swinging, waiting.

When the door opened and Carolyn Devore stepped in, Gwen said breathlessly, "Well?"

Carolyn closed the door, smiling. "You were right. You're pregnant, Gwen."

"*I am?*" she breathed, scarcely daring to believe it.

"Yes."

"Truly?" she persisted.

Carolyn laughed. "Absolutely and unequivocally."

Gwen hopped off the table and hugged her. "I *love* you, Carolyn," she exclaimed. "Oh, thank you!"

Carolyn laughed again. "I can hardly take credit for it, but you're welcome."

For several minutes, all Gwen could do was repeat "I'm pregnant," a delighted smile on her face.

"You need to gain weight, Gwen," Carolyn chided. "I squeezed you in this afternoon because you sounded so awful on the phone. It worried me." She paused, as if searching for a delicate way to continue. "I know you lost both your parents this year." Her brown gaze was sympathetic.

Gwen nodded tightly, smile fading.

"Grieving takes its toll. You're ten pounds lighter than you were at your last checkup. I'm starting you on supplements today and putting you on a special diet. It's fairly self-explanatory, but if you have any questions, call me. Eat. Feel free to stuff yourself. Go overboard for a while." She gave Gwen a folder of menu suggestions and a bag of sample supplements to tide her over until she went to the drugstore.

"Yes, ma'am," Gwen promised. "Scout's honor. I'll gain, I promise."

"Will the father be helping you?" Carolyn asked carefully.

Gwen took a deep breath. *I am strong*, she told herself. *My baby is depending on me*. "He's... um... he, er... died." The word escaped in a soft rush of air; merely saying it hurt her to the marrow in her bones. *Five hundred years ago*, she didn't say. Carolyn would have packed her off to a cushy, padded hospital if she'd said that.

"Oh, Gwen," Carolyn exclaimed, squeezing her hand, "I'm so sorry."

Gwen glanced away, unable to meet Carolyn's sympathetic gaze. Simple kindness could undo her, make the tears come. Carolyn must have sensed it, because her voice changed, became briskly professional again.

"I can't stress enough that you must gain weight. Your body is going to need special care, and I'd like to schedule an ultrasound."

"An ultrasound? Why? Is something wrong?" Gwen was alarmed and her gaze flew back up to Carolyn's.

"No, nothing's wrong," Carolyn hastened to assure her. "In fact," she added, smiling, "depending on your outlook, you might think it's something wonderful. Your hCG levels lead me to believe you're carrying twins. An ultrasound will give us a definite answer."

"Oh, my God! Twins!" Gwen cried. "Twins," she repeated disbelievingly. Twins just like Drustan and Dageus. A chill raced through her—not just one of his babies, but two! *Oh, Drustan*, she thought, lanced by piercing sorrow. *Twins, my love!* How he would have rejoiced in the news, how he would have celebrated the birth of their children!

But he would never know, would never see his sons or daughters. She would never get to share this with him. She dosed her eyes against a wave of pain.

Carolyn watched her closely. "Are you all right, Gwen?"

Gwen nodded, her throat tight. After a long moment, she opened her eyes again.

"If you need to talk, Gwen..." Carolyn trailed off, waiting.

Gwen nodded stiffly. "Thank you, but I think it's just going to take some time." She forced a weak smile. "I'll be fine, Carolyn. I'll take care of myself, I promise." Nothing would jeopardize her babies.

"I'll squeeze you in again on Friday," Carolyn said, walking with her to the door. "I'll have my receptionist call you this afternoon with a time."

Gwen thanked her profusely. "You have no idea how much I needed to know this."

Carolyn gazed at the dark circles beneath her eyes. "I think I do," she said softly. "Now go home, eat and take care of yourself. There's more than just yourself to think about now."

Gwen waved good-bye to the receptionist as she left.

She was pregnant. She had a part of Drustan inside her. A child of his, possibly two, to raise, to love, to cherish.

Walking across the parking lot to her car, she was briefly stunned by how blue the sky seemed, how bright the sun, how green the grass.

Color. There was light in her soul again.

Chapter 27

A week later, Gwen was back in Scotland.

She sat at the base of the MacKeltar's mountain, perched on the hood of her rental car, gazing up, filled with trepidation.

When Carolyn had confirmed she was carrying twins, a surge of energy had flooded her. She'd cleaned her apartment, put the phone back on the hook, gotten her hair trimmed, treated herself to an eyebrow waxing, and gone grocery shopping. Then she'd called Allstate to tender her resignation, only to find they'd already fired her for not showing up for so many weeks. No loss there, she'd shrugged philosophically.

She'd called a Realtor and placed her parents' house on the market. The ostentatious showplace had been paid off years ago, and the sale of it would give her more than enough money to make a fresh start. She was done with Santa Fe. Done with insurance claims, done with it all. She was thinking of moving to the East Coast, maybe Maine, near Bert and Beatrice. She'd buy a lovely house with a darling nursery. Perhaps get a job at a local university teaching math and making it *fun*.

But before she could do any of that, before she could move forward, she had to somehow make peace with the past.

And the only way to do that was to lay to rest the questions that drove her mad at three o'clock in the morning when her heart felt heavy and her soul was inclined to brood.

Questions like: Had Drustan died from the arrow wound, or survived? And if he'd survived, had he ever married? She *hated* considering that one, because it left her feeling so torn. She would be crushed if he had remarried, yet at the same time, she would be crushed if he'd spent the rest of his life grieving. She loved him so much that if he'd lived, she wanted him to have been happy. It hurt her to think that he might have grieved for thirty or forty or fifty years. She realized that *she* was the lucky one: They'd both lost each other, but she alone had the precious gift of their babies.

More questions: Had Dageus had children? Had any MacKeltar descendants survived to the twenty-first century? The answer to that question could be a blessing, for if MacKeltars still lived above Alborath, she would feel as if they hadn't failed completely. One of the things Drustan had wanted was to ensure the future succession of his clan, and if by saving Dageus they had guaranteed survival of his clan, she could find some small measure of satisfaction in that.

Even more than finding answers, however, she needed to go sit by his grave, to lay sprigs of heather atop it, to tell him of their children, to laugh and reminisce and weep.

Then she would go home and be strong for their babies. It was what Drustan would want.

Steeling herself, she slipped back into the rental car.

She didn't delude herself, she knew that whatever she found atop the mountain was going to be excruciating. Because this was going to have to be the final goodbye...

* * * * *

As Gwen topped the crest of the mountain, her eyes misted.

The perimeter wall had been torn down, and the majestic stones of *Ban Drochaid* towered against the brilliant, cloudless blue sky.

There she had made love with her Highland mate. There she had traveled back into the past. There she had become pregnant, according to her due date.

She'd known that seeing the stones again would hurt, because a part of her was tempted to hole up in a laboratory and try to figure out the formulas that danced so far beyond her comprehension. The only thing that held her back was that Gwen knew—even as brilliant as she was—that she could devote the rest of her life to it, only to die a bitter old woman, never gaining the knowledge. She would *not* live her life like that, nor would she subject her children to it. The few times she'd pondered the symbols, she'd realized how far beyond her understanding they were. She might be a genius, but she just wasn't smart enough.

Nor would she plead—if modern MacKeltars still lived—with them to break

their oaths and send her back, and unleash a dark Druid upon the world. No, she would be the woman Drustan had loved, honorable, ethical, loving.

Thus resolved, she accelerated past the stones and lifted her gaze to the castle. She sucked in a breath. Castle Keltar was even more beautiful than it had been in the sixteenth century. A sparkling, many-tiered fountain had been constructed on the front lawn. It was surrounded by a lush tumble of shrubbery and flowers and stone walkways. The facade had been renovated, probably many times over the centuries, and the front stairs were no longer stone but had been replaced with rosy marble. An elegant matching marble banister framed both sides. What had once been a huge wooden door was now double doors fashioned of burnished cherry trimmed with gold. Above the doors, a stained glass window detailing—her heart leaped—the MacKeltar plaid, shimmered brilliant purple in the sunlight.

She parked before the steps and sat gazing at the door, wondering if that small bit of MacKeltar heritage meant the castle was still inhabited by descendants. Suddenly the door opened and a young child, blond curls tumbling about a delicate face, stepped out, peering at her curiously. Inside the rented Volvo, Gwen squinted against the bright sunlight at the lovely little girl, who was followed closely by a boy of similar age, and an older pair of twins.

The eldest boy and girl took her breath away and eradicated any question in her mind about whether any descendants had survived.

They most certainly had.

Pure MacKeltar blood was apparent in both of the older children—in the rich dark manes, the unusual eyes and golden skin. The boy could have been Dageus's own son, with similar golden eyes.

She dosed her eyes briefly, fighting tears, feeling both joyous and sad. They hadn't failed completely, but the visit was going to be excruciating, she realized, massaging her temples.

"Hello," the little girl called, knocking on the car window. "Will you be getting out, or will you be sitting in there all day?"

Gwen snorted lightly, the pain easing a bit. She opened her eyes and smiled. The

little girl was absolutely darling, peering in expectantly. *You're going to have two of those soon*, a comforting voice reminded her.

"Cara, get back from that car!" a blond woman who looked to be in her early thirties called, hurrying down the front steps.

She was heavily pregnant, and Gwen instinctively touched her own abdomen. Turning off the ignition, she tucked her bangs behind her ear and opened the car door. She realized, as she stepped out, that she'd not thought this far ahead: She had no idea what excuse she would offer for dropping in on perfect strangers. She would have to play it by ear, claim to be taken with the castle, then beg a tour. She was grateful that the woman was pregnant because she was willing to bet she would invite her in to visit without asking too many questions. Gwen had recently discovered that pregnant women were a breed unto their own, with a tendency to forge an instantaneous, deep bond. A few days ago, she'd chatted for over an hour with a pregnant stranger in the ice cream aisle of the grocery, discussing baby clothes and tests and methods of birth and all kinds of things that would bore a nonpregnant person silly.

"I take it these lovely ones are yours?" Gwen said, offering her friendliest smile.

"Aye, my youngest are Cory and Cara," she said, gesturing toward them. Cara said hello again, and Cory smiled shyly. "And these"—she waved a hand at the dark-haired teenage twins—"are Christian and Colleen." They chimed hello together.

"Plus I've two on the way in a few months," Maggie added. "As if it weren't obvious," she said dryly.

"I'm pregnant with twins myself," Gwen confided.

Maggie's eyes flickered strangely. "'Tis easier that way," she said. "You get them over with two at a time, and I always wanted a dozen or so. I'm Maggie MacKeltar and my husband should be out in a moment." She turned to the steps and shouted, "Christopher, do hurry, she's here!"

"Coming, love," a deep baritone voice replied.

Gwen frowned, puzzled, wondering what Maggie had meant by "she's here." Had they mistaken her for someone else? Perhaps they were expecting someone,

she decided, maybe they were hiring a nanny or a maid and thought Gwen was that person.

Cara tugged impatiently at Maggie's arm. "Mama, when are we going to show her—" Cara began.

"Hush," Maggie said swiftly. "Run along with you and Cory. We'll be in shortly. Christian, you and Colleen go help Mrs. Melbourne lay the tea in the solar."

"But, Mom—"

"Do I have to repeat myself?"

I'm going to have to clear up this case of mistaken identity, Gwen thought, watching the children go in. She didn't care for the thought of misleading Maggie MacKeltar. Then all thought fled her mind as Maggie's husband,

Christopher, stepped out of the castle. Gwen sucked in a breath, feeling suddenly faint.

"Aye, the resemblance is strong, isn't it now?" Maggie said softly, watching her.

A dark lock of hair fell over Christopher's forehead, and he had the same extraordinary height and muscled body. His eyes were not silver, but a deep, peaceful gray. He looked so much like Drustan that it hurt to look at him.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Gwen stammered, trying to compose herself.

"I mean he looks like Drustan," Maggie replied.

Gwen opened her mouth but nothing came out. *Like Drustan?* What did they know about her and Drustan?

"Och, Gwen Cassidy," Christopher said with a thick Scots burr, "we've been waiting for you for some time now." Smiling, he slid his arm around Maggie's waist. They both stood there, beaming at her.

Gwen blinked. "How do you know my name?" she asked weakly. "What do you know about Drustan? What's going on here?" she asked, her voice rising.

Maggie kissed her husband's cheek, slipped from his embrace, and tucked her

arm through Gwen's. "Come in, Gwen. We have much to tell you, but I think you might be needing to sit while you're hearing it."

"Sit," Gwen repeated dumbly, her knees feeling weak. "Good. Sitting would be good."

* * * * *

But sitting didn't happen, because the moment Gwen entered the Greathall, she froze, gaping at the portrait that hung above the double staircase facing the entrance.

It was her.

Six feet of Gwen Cassidy, clad in a pale lavender gown, blond hair tumbling about her face, graced the wall at the landing between the two staircases. "Me," she managed to say, pointing. "That's me."

Maggie laughed. "Aye. It was painted in the sixteenth century—"

But Gwen didn't hear the rest. Her attention was caught and held by the family portraits covering nearly every inch of the walls in the Greathall. From ancient times to modern day, they stretched from chair rail to ceiling.

Eager to see who Dageus had married, and what kind of children he'd fathered, she hurried past the modern paintings. Dimly, her mind registered that Maggie and Christopher were trailing behind her, now watching in silence.

At the section displaying the sixteenth century, Gwen drew to a stunned halt. She stared for a moment, unable to believe what she saw, then smiled as tears misted her eyes. She fancied she could hear faint strains of Silvan's laughter in the air. And Nell, making some saucy response. The patter of children's feet on stone.

The painting that held her captivated was eight feet tall. A full-length portrait, Nell was seated on the terrace, Silvan was standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. Nell held twins in her arms. "Nell?" she finally said, turning to look at Maggie.

"Aye. The lot of us descend directly from Silvan and Nell MacKeltar. He wed his housekeeper, so the records say. They had four children. We have twins an uncommon lot in this family."

"He looks pretty old to be having kids to me," Colleen said, wrinkling her nose as she bounded back into the Greathall, followed by her siblings. "The tea's ready," she announced.

Gwen's heart swelled. "He was sixty-two," she said softly. And Nell hadn't been a spring chicken either. Dear Nell had gotten her babies back after all, and it had been Silvan who'd given them to her.

She moved to the next portrait, but two empty spaces followed. The wall was darker where portraits had once hung. "What was here?" she asked curiously. Had they taken down portraits of Drustan to give her?

Christopher and Maggie exchanged an odd glance. "Just two portraits being touched up," Christopher said. "There's Nell and Silvan again," he said, pointing farther down the wall.

Gwen eyed them a moment. "And Dageus? Where is Dageus?" she asked.

Again, the couple exchanged glances. "He's a mystery," Maggie finally said. "He wandered off somewhere in 1521."

"Is there no record of his death?"

"No," Maggie replied tersely.

How *very odd*, Gwen mused. But she would come back to that later, for now thoughts of Drustan consumed her. "Do you have any portraits of Drustan?"

"Mom!" Colleen cried. "Come on, you're killing me! Let's get on with it!"

Christopher and Maggie grinned. "Come, we have something more for you."

"But I have so many questions," Gwen protested. "How do you—"

"Later," Maggie said gently. "I think we need to show you this first, then you can ask whatever questions remain."

Gwen opened her mouth, shut it again, and followed.

* * * * *

When Maggie stopped at the door to the tower, Gwen took a slow, deep breath to

calm the racing of her heart. Had Drustan left something for her? Something she could give her children, from the father they would never know? When Maggie and Christopher exchanged a loving glance, she nearly wept with envy.

Maggie had her MacKeltar; Gwen longed for some small token to remember hers by. A plaid with his scent, a portrait to show her babies, anything. She shivered, waiting.

Maggie withdrew a key from her pocket, dangling on a frayed and threadbare ribbon.

"There is a... legacy handed down over the centuries at Castle Keltar. It has been the source of many young lasses' romantic dreams"—she arched a brow at her eldest daughter—"and Colleen here has been the worst—"

"Not true. I've heard you and Dad mooning over it tons of times, and then you both get that disgusting look in your eyes—"

"Might I remind you, that disgusting look heralded the advent of your wee life," Christopher said dryly.

"*Eww.*" Colleen wrinkled her nose again.

Maggie laughed and continued. "Sometimes I think the sheer love of it has blessed all who've ever lived within these walls. The tale was carefully told from generation to generation as they waited for the day to come. Well, the day has arrived, and now the rest is up to you." Smiling, she handed Gwen the key. "It's said you'll know what to do."

"It's said you've done it *before*," Colleen added breathlessly.

Perplexed, Gwen inserted the key with trembling hands. The lock was old and gritty with time, and it took her a few minutes to work the lock.

As she opened the door, Christopher handed her a candle. "There's no electricity in there. The tower hasn't been opened in five centuries."

Suspense growing, Gwen accepted the candle and gingerly stepped into the room, dimly aware that the entire MacKeltar clan was hot on her heels.

It was too dark to see much, but the glow of the candle fell upon a pile of old

fabric and the silvery flash of weapons.

Drustan's daggers!

Her heart lurched painfully.

She bent over and fingered the fabric upon which they lay. Tears stung her eyes when she realized it was his plaid, and atop it lay a small pair of black leather trews that would probably be a perfect fit.

He'd never forgotten that she'd wanted a pair.

"That's not all," Colleen said impatiently. "That's the least of it. Look up!"

"Colleen," Christopher said sternly. "In her own time, lass."

Blinking back tears, Gwen glanced up, and as her eyes adjusted completely, she noticed a slab in the center of the circular room. Her heart slammed against her ribs, and she surged to her feet.

"Oh, my God," she choked, stumbling toward the slab. It couldn't be. How could it be? She glanced frantically at Maggie, who smiled and nodded encouragingly.

"He waits for you. He's waited five hundred years. It is said you know how to wake him."

Gwen began to hyperventilate. Spots swarmed before her eyes and she nearly collapsed where she stood. For several moments she could do nothing more than stand there and stare in shock. Then she thrust the black trews she hadn't realized she was clutching at Maggie and scrambled up onto the slab.

"Drustan," she cried, raining kisses on his slumbering face. "Oh, Drustan! My love..." Tears slipped down her cheeks.

How had she awakened him? she wondered frantically, unable to believe that he was really there. She touched him with shaking hands, afraid he might just melt away, afraid she was dreaming.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" she whispered weakly.

"No, lass, you're not dreaming," Christopher said, smiling.

Gwen stared at Drustan, trying to recall exactly what had happened in the cave. She'd fallen down the ravine and landed squarely on top of him. She'd been fascinated, had touched him, shamelessly running her hands over his chest. Then she'd leaned back so the sun could fall on him, so she might get a better look at the devastating man.

"The sun! You must help me get him outside," she said urgently. "I think sunlight has something to do with it!"

It took their combined strength to carry the enchanted Highlander down the winding stairs, through the library, and put onto the cobbled terrace. They were huffing by the time they deposited her mighty warrior on the stones.

Gwen stood for a moment, just gaping down at him. Drustan was *here!* All she had to do was figure out how to wake him! Dazed, she slipped astride him and placed her palms flush to his chest, exactly as she'd done in the cave. The sunshine was falling directly on his face and chest.

But nothing happened.

The symbols remained, etched clearly upon his chest. Back in the cave, they'd begun disappearing. Why?

She narrowed her eyes and peered up at the sun. It was brilliant and clear, a cloudless day. She glanced at Maggie. "He didn't leave any instructions?" She needed him awake *now*.

The MacKeltars shook their heads.

"It was thought he feared someone might wake him before it was time," Maggie said. She cast Colleen a wry look. "Like my daughter who's been infatuated with him since she first peeked through the slit in the tower and saw him slumbering."

Closing her eyes, Gwen thought hard. What was different? She opened them again slowly and gazed down at his chest. Everything was the same: the sun, the symbols, her hands...

Blood. There had been blood smeared on the symbols from her cutting her hands up when she'd fallen through the rocks. Could it be that elemental? Human blood and sunshine? She knew nothing about spells, but blood figured prominently in

myths and legends.

"I need a knife," she cried.

Colleen dashed into the castle and returned swiftly, clutching a small steak knife.

Mumbling a prayer beneath her breath, Gwen lightly ran the edge over her palm so drops of blood welled up. With trembling hands, she smeared it across the symbols on his chest, then sat back anxiously, waiting.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then one by one, the symbols began to fade...

She sucked in her breath and glanced up at his face.

"Good morrow, English," Drustan said lazily, opening his eyes, his silvery gaze tender. "I knew you could do it, love."

Gwen's eyelids fluttered and she fainted.

Chapter 28

When Gwen regained consciousness, she was lying on the bed in the Silver Chamber. Drustan was bending over her, gazing down with so much love in his eyes that she gasped and began crying.

"Drustan," she whispered, clutching at him.

"She's awakened, Maggie," Drustan said over his shoulder. "She's all right." Gwen heard the door shut as Maggie left, giving them privacy.

She stared up into his silvery eyes wonderingly. He was looking at her as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

"How?" she managed to ask, cupping his face in her hands. She traced her fingers over every plane and angle, and he kissed them repeatedly as they passed his lips. "How?"

"I love you, Gwen MacKeltar," he whispered, catching her hand and planting a kiss in the palm.

Gwen laughed through her tears. "I love you too," she whispered back, flinging her arms around him and holding him tightly. "But I don't understand."

In between dozens of kisses, quick sips, long leisurely ones, he told her.

Told her how he'd watched her disappear as he'd lain on the ground, the battle raging all around. Told her how the arrow had been deflected by the metal disc on his leather bands and had been but a flesh wound. Told her how they'd discovered who the "enemy" was.

"That old woman," Gwen murmured. "She said she'd hired the gypsies."

"Aye, Besseta. She made a full confession." He kissed her again before continuing, sucking gently on her lower lip. "Besseta claimed she scryed in her yew sticks that a woman would bring about the death of her son. Since I was soon to wed, Besseta decided my betrothed must be the woman in her vision. She warned Nevin, but he laughed it off and made her promise not to harm me. To her ailing mind, bespelling me wasn't harming me, so she purchased the

gypsy's services to enchant me so she might prevent the wedding. In the first reality, when Anya was killed by the Campbell, Besseta must have thought the threat had passed. I suspect, however, that sometime shortly after Anya's death, Besseta must have had her vision again, and realized that as long as I was alive and might yet wed, the danger would never pass. So she proceeded with her original plan to have me enchanted."

"So she drugged you and sent the message bidding you come to discover the name of the man who'd killed Dageus."

"Aye. I was enchanted, you found me, and I sent you back."

"But in the second reality," Gwen exclaimed, "since

Dageus and Anya weren't killed, she must have heard you were coming home with your betrothed—"

"—and stepped up plans to have me abducted. Unwilling to take any chances; she wanted my "betrothed" gone too. As you were in my bedchamber, they assumed you were Anya."

Gwen shook her head, *amazed*. "It was her belief in her vision that made everything happen, Drustan! If she hadn't believed in it, she would never have enchanted you, I would never have been sent back, and Nevin would never have given his life to save me."

"Aye. 'Tis why the gypsy are o'ercautious of fortune telling. They make it dear that any future they scry is but one possible future: the most likely one, yet not writ in stone. For Besseta, driven by lifelong fear, it was indeed her most probable future. Fear drove her to have me enchanted. Having me enchanted resulted in me sending you back. Once you were there, Nevin gave his life to protect you. Her fear drove her to fulfill the possibility."

Gwen rubbed her forehead. "This hurts my head."

Drustan laughed. "It hurts mine too. I'll be most happy to ne'er muck with time again."

Gwen was silent a moment, thinking. "What happened to Besseta?"

Drustan's eyes darkened. "After you disappeared, she plunged into the battle, and though the men strove not to harm her, she was determined to die. She impaled herself on Robert's claymore." He frowned. "She confessed before she died, and we were able to piece the story together."

Fresh tears gathered in Gwen's eyes.

"You would weep for her?" Drustan exclaimed.

"If not for her, I should never have found you," Gwen said softly. "It's sad. It's sad that she was so afraid. But at the same time, I'm so glad I found you."

He kissed her again, then told her the rest of it. How he'd grieved, how he raged. How he'd stormed to the stones and stood arguing with himself for hours.

Then his mind had struck upon an idea—so temptingly possible that it had taken his breath away.

The gypsies. They'd made him sleep once for five centuries. Why not again? And so he'd tracked down the wandering tribe and commissioned their services. The gypsy queen herself had performed the spell for a pouch of coin.

"For a pouch of coin!" Gwen exclaimed. "How dare they charge you? They were the ones who—"

"Who sold a service, nothing more. The Rom hold themselves to a strange code. They maintain that blaming them for Besseta commissioning them to enchant me would be akin to blaming the blade for drawing blood. 'Tis the hand that wields the dagger, not the dagger itself."

"Fine way to evade personal responsibility," Gwen grumbled. Then she sucked in a shallow breath. "Your family! Silvan and Nell and—"

He cut her off by kissing her. "My choice was painful to them, but they understood."

He'd not once wavered. He'd spent several months saying his good-byes before being enchanted. And implementing plans that would bear fruit five centuries later, plans to ensure a fine life for him and his wife. But there would be time to tell her of that tomorrow, or the next day or the next. "They bid me give you

their love when we were reunited."

Gwen got misty-eyed again, then thumped his chest with her fist. "Why didn't you leave instructions for Maggie to find me weeks ago?" she cried. "My heart broke. I've been back for over a month—"

"I wasn't certain when you would return to your time. I couldn't decide if the month would pass for you in both centuries."

"Oh," she said in a small voice.

"And I wasn't willing to take any chances of summoning you before you'd met me. Och, but what a fankle that would have been. You wouldn't have known how to wake me. You wouldn't have even *known* me if we'd sent for you too early. Seemed safer to let you come."

"But what if I hadn't come? What if I'd never come back to Scotland?"

"I left instructions that if you hadn't arrived by Samhain, my descendants should find you and bid you come. They were to look for you in America and bring you here."

"But—"

"Are you going to talk me to death or kiss me, wife?" he asked huskily.

She opted for the kiss.

When his lips claimed hers, her body quickened with desire. He paused only to strip off his linen shirt, while Gwen made short work of his plaid.

"Lay back," she commanded when she had him completely naked. "I think I should like to be on top." He complied, flashing her a sexy grin that dripped promises of fantasies about to be fulfilled. She sat back on her heels, gazing at him, sprawled across the bed. His bronze skin and silky dark hair gleamed against the white linens. Six and a half feet of Highland warrior lay before her, awaiting her pleasure.

Yum.

Years of not understanding the equation of life culminated in one perfect

moment of clarity—life equaled love plus passion squared. Loving and being passionate about what one did was what made life so precious. She would be perfectly content to devote the rest of her life to the proof of that equation.

"Touch me," he purred.

She touched. Lightly, gliding her hands up his muscular thighs. Tracing each muscle, each ridge, then lowering her head to taste in her hand's wake. She cupped him and swept her tongue up the underside of his hard shaft, delighted when he bucked beneath her.

"Gwendolyn!" he thundered, cradling her head with his hands. "I willna last a minute if you do that!"

"Och, nay, my braw laird," she said in a lilting Scots accent. "Be still. 'Tis my pleasure you serve—ack!" She burst into laughter when in one swift motion he rolled her onto her back.

"I bid you recall I've been needing you for five hundred years, whereas you've been waiting only a month."

"Yes, but you didn't know time was pass—" she began, but he kissed her words away. He covered her body with his own, sliding her shirt up, kissing each breast as he bared them. Alternately returning for a searing kiss to her lips, then moving lower.

When at last he buried himself inside her, he groaned with ecstasy. He'd have waited a thousand years, nay, eternity, to have this woman as his own.

* * * * *

Much later, Drustan held her in his arms, marveling at how she completed him. She'd had her way, and had the top—the third time—informing him he was her "own private playground," then explaining what a playground was. He had much to learn to fully integrate himself into her century. He suffered no fear on that score; rather, was exhilarated by the challenge.

Emotion flooded him, a sense of rightness and completion, and he kissed her, putting all his joy into the kiss. He was surprised when she pulled away, but then she took his hand and gently placed his palm over her belly.

He shot straight up in bed, searching her eyes. "Are you telling me something?" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Twins. We're having twins," she said, bubbling over with joy.

"And you waited till *now* to tell me?" he roared, then threw his head back and whooped. He swept her into his arms and danced her about the room. He twirled her, kissed her, danced her more, then stopped and gently placed her back on the bed. "I shouldna be tossin' you about like that," he exclaimed.

Gwen laughed. "Oh, please, if our loving didn't jostle them, a little dance certainly won't hurt. I'm a little over two months along."

"Two months!" he shouted, leaping to his feet again.

Gwen beamed; he was so elated. It was what every woman should get to experience when she told her man she was pregnant—a man utterly ecstatic to be a father.

He stood grinning like a fool for a moment, then sobered and dropped to his knees before her. "Will you be weddin' me in a church, Gwendolyn?"

"Aye, oh, aye," Gwen sighed dreamily.

And this time when they made love it was tender and slow and sweeter than e'er before.

* * * * *

"Where will we live?" she asked finally, combing her fingers through his silky hair. She simply couldn't stop touching him. Couldn't believe he was here. Couldn't believe the sacrifice he'd made to be with her.

He grinned. "I took care of that. The estate was divided into thirds in 1518. My third is to the south. Dageus oversaw the construction of our home. It awaits us even now. Maggie and Christopher assured me they opened it and all is in readiness."

Dageus, Gwen thought. She needed to tell him about Dageus vanishing, but there would time for that later. She didn't want anything to spoil the moment.

"You doona mind living in Scotland, do you, lass?" he teased lightly, but she

sensed a hint of vulnerability in his question. It would be hard for him to adjust to a new century. It would be even more difficult if she dragged him off to America. In time, she suspected he would like to travel, for he was a curious man, but Scotland would always be his home. Which was fine, she had no desire to go back to the States.

The enormity of what he'd done, how much he'd given up for her, overwhelmed her.

"Drustan," she breathed, "you gave it all up—"

He pulled her onto his chest and brushed his lips against hers. "And I would do it all over again, sweet Gwen."

"But your family, your century, your home—"

"Och, lass, doona you know? Your heart *is* my home."

Dear reader:

I'd like to share with you a letter that neither Gwen nor Drustan have yet seen. I'm sure you noticed the connection between the two portraits missing in the MacKeltar hall, and Dageus "vanishing" in 1521.

There are actually *two* legacies handed down over the centuries, but rather than spoil Gwen and Drustan's reunion, Maggie and Christopher agreed to hold off on revealing the second one.

You see, they have a letter addressed to Drustan and Gwen, from Silvan, as well as two shocking portraits of Dageus to show them. Yet they wished for Gwen and Drustan to have a few more stolen moments for loving before their new journey begins.

Turn the page for a peek at Silvan's letter, from *Dark Highlander*...

Drustan, my son:

I have missed you. I wish you could have met your brothers and sisters, but your heart was with Gwen, and 'twas where it wisely belonged. I wish the two of you every happiness, but rue to tell you your trials are not yet o'er.

First, the gentler news. Beloved Nell consented to be my wife. She has made every moment a joy. We left a few things for the two of you in the tower. Count over three stones on the base of the slab, second stone from the bottom. Life has been rich and full, more than I e'er dreamed. I have no regrets but one.

I should have watched Dageus more closely after you went into the tower. I should have seen what was happening. There you slumbered, enchanted, waiting for your mate, here I sat, with mine.

Yet Dageus grew e'er more solitary. Blinded by my own happiness, I didn't see what was happening until it was too late. I shall be scant with the details, but suffice it to say as time passed, he became... obsessed with you. He worried that something would happen to prevent you from surviving until you found Gwen again.

And it did. I have no memory of it, mayhap an odd wrinkle in my mind, but he confessed to me that three years after we placed your enchanted body in the northeast tower, that wing of the castle caught fire and you were burned and died.

Dageus broke his oath, went back in time through the stones to the day of the fire, and prevented the fire from occurring. He saved you, but in so doing, turned Dark. The old legends were true.

If you are reading this, he succeeded in his course, for he appointed himself your dark guardian, his sole purpose to see you safely to Gwen. He vowed to watch over you, then disappeared. Dageus is a strong man, and I believe such a vow has kept him sane.

I hope it has, for I tasted the evil within him.

I believe, however, the moment you awaken and are reunited, there will be nothing to hold his darkness at bay. His purpose accomplished, the thin thread that binds him to the light will snap.

Och, my son, 'tis sorry I am to be sayin' this, but you must find him.

You must save him.

And if you cannot save him, you must kill him.

The Dark Highlander

Karen Marie Moning

*Time is the coin of your life.
It is the only coin you have,
and only you can determine how it will be spent,
Be careful lest you let other people spend it for you.*
—CARL SANDBURG

First Prologue

In a place difficult for humans to find, a man, of sorts—it amused him to go by the name of Adam Black among mortals—approached a silk-canopied dais and knelt before his queen.

"My queen, The Compact is broken."

Aoibheal, queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, was silent for a long time. When finally she turned to her consort, her voice dripped ice. "Summon the council."

Second Prologue

Thousands of years before the birth of Christ, there settled in Ireland a race called the Tuatha Dé Danaan who, over time, became known as the True Race, or the Fairy.

An advanced civilization from a faraway world, the Tuatha Dé Danaan educated some of the more promising humans they encountered in Druid ways. For a time, man and fairy shared the earth in peace, but sadly, bitter dissension arose between them, and the Tuatha Dé Danaan decided to move on. Legend claims they were driven "under the hills" into "fairy mounds." The truth is they never left our world, but hold their fantastic court in places difficult for humans to find.

After the Tuatha Dé Danaan left, the human Druids warred among themselves, splintering into factions. Thirteen of them turned to dark ways and—thanks to what the Tuatha Dé Danaan had taught them—nearly destroyed the earth.

The Tuatha Dé Danaan emerged from their hidden places and stopped the dark Druids moments before they succeeded in damaging the earth beyond repair. They stripped the Druids of their power, scattering them to the far corners of the earth. They punished the thirteen who'd turned dark by casting them into a place between dimensions, locking their immortal souls in an eternal prison.

The Tuatha Dé Danaan then selected a noble bloodline, the Keltar, to use the sacred knowledge to rebuild and nurture the land. Together, they negotiated The Compact: the treaty governing cohabitation of their races. The Keltar swore many oaths to the Tuatha Dé Danaan, first and foremost that they would never use the power of the standing stones—which give the man who knows the sacred formulas the ability to move through space and time—for personal gain or political ends. The Tuatha Dé Danaan pledged many things in return, first and foremost that they would never spill the lifeblood of a mortal. Both races have long abided by the pledges made that day.

Over the ensuing millennia, the MacKeltar journeyed to Scotland and settled in the Highlands above what is now called Inverness. Although most of their ancient history from the time of their involvement with the Tuatha Dé Danaan has melted into the mists of their distant past and been forgotten, and although there is no record of a Keltar encountering a Tuatha Dé Danaan since then, they

have never strayed from their sworn purpose.

Pledged to serve the greater good of the world, no MacKeltar has ever broken his sacred oath. On the few occasions they have opened a gate to other times within the circle of stones, it has been for the noblest of reasons: to protect the earth from great peril. An ancient legend holds that if a MacKeltar breaks his oath and uses the stones to travel through time for personal purposes, the myriad souls of the darkest Druids trapped in the in-between will claim him and make him the most evil, terrifyingly powerful Druid humankind has ever known.

In the late-fifteenth century, twin brothers Drustan and Dageus MacKeltar are born. As their ancestors before them, they protect the ancient lore, nurture the land, and guard the coveted secret of the standing stones.

Honorable men, without corruption, Dageus and Drustan serve faithfully.

Until one fateful night, in a moment of blinding grief, Dageus MacKeltar violates the sacred Compact.

When his brother Drustan is killed, Dageus enters the circle of stones and goes back in time to prevent Drustan's death. He succeeds, but between dimensions is taken by the souls of the evil Druids, who have not tasted or touched or smelled, not made love or danced or vied for power for nearly four thousand years.

Now Dageus MacKeltar is a man with one good conscience—and thirteen bad ones. Although he can hold his own for a while, his time is growing short.

The darkest Druid currently resides in the East 70s in Manhattan, and that is where our story begins.

PRESENT DAY

Chapter 1

Dageus MacKeltar walked like a man and talked like a man, but in bed he was pure animal.

Criminal attorney Katherine O'Malley called a spade a spade, and the man was raw Sex with a capital S. Now that she'd slept with him, she was ruined for other men.

It wasn't just what he looked like, with his sculpted body, skin poured like gold velvet over steel, chiseled features, and silky black hair. Or that lazy, utterly arrogant smile that promised a woman paradise. And delivered. One hundred percent satisfaction guaranteed.

It wasn't even the exotic golden eyes fringed by thick black lashes beneath slanted brows.

It was what he did to her.

He was sex like she'd never had in her life, and Katherine had been having sex for seventeen years. She thought she'd seen it all. But when Dageus MacKeltar touched her, she came apart at the seams. Aloof, his every movement smoothly controlled, when he stripped off his clothing he stripped off every ounce of that rigid discipline and turned into an untamed barbarian. He fucked with the single-minded intensity of a man on death row, execution at dawn.

Just thinking about him made places low in her belly clench. Made her skin feel stretched too tight across her bones. Made her breath come short and sharp.

Now, standing in the anteroom outside the enameled French doors of his exquisite Manhattan penthouse overlooking Central Park that fit him like a second skin—starkly elegant, black, white, chrome, and hard—she felt intensely alive, every nerve wired. Drawing a deep breath, she turned the handle and pushed open the door.

It was never locked. As if he feared nothing forty-three floors above the flash and razor edges of the city. As if he'd seen the worst the Big Apple had to offer and found it all mildly amusing. As if the city might be big and bad, but he was

bigger and badder.

She stepped inside, inhaling the rich scent of sandal-wood and roses. Classical music spilled through the luxurious rooms—Mozart's *Requiem*—but she knew that later he might play Nine Inch Nails and stretch her naked body against the wall of windows that overlooked the Conservatory Water, driving into her until she screamed her release to the bright city lights below.

Sixty feet of coveted Fifth Avenue frontage in the East 70s—and she had no idea what he did for a living. Most of the time she wasn't certain she wanted to know.

She pushed the doors shut behind her and allowed the buttery-soft folds of her leather coat to spill to the floor, revealing black lace-topped thigh-highs, matching panties, and a sheer push-up bra that presented her full breasts to perfection. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the darkened windows and smiled. At thirty-three, Katherine O'Malley looked good. She should look good, she thought, arching a brow, as much exercise as she'd been getting in his bed. Or on the floor. Sprawled across the leather sofa. In his black marble Jacuzzi...

A wave of lust made her dizzy, and she breathed deeply to slow her pounding heart. She felt insatiable around him. A time or two she'd briefly entertained the outrageous thought that he might not be human. That maybe he was some mythical sex god, perhaps Priapus beckoned by the needy inhabitants of the city that never slept. Or some creature of long-forgotten lore, a *Sidhe* that had the ability to heighten pleasure to extremes mortals weren't meant to taste.

"Katie-lass." His voice floated down from the top floor of the fifteen-room duplex, dark and rich, his Scottish accent making her think of peat smoke, ancient stones, and aged whisky.

Only Dageus MacKeltar could get away with calling Katherine O'Malley "Katie-lass."

As he descended the curving staircase and entered the thirty-foot living room with its vaulted ceilings, marble fireplace, and panoramic view of the park, she remained motionless, drinking him in. He wore black linen trousers, and she knew there would be nothing beneath them but the most perfect male body she'd ever seen. Her gaze drifted over his wide shoulders, down his hard chest and his rippling abs, lingering on the twin ropes of muscle that cut his lower stomach

and disappeared into his pants, beckoning the eye to follow.

"Good enough to eat?" His golden eyes glittered as they raked her body.

"Come." He extended his hand. "Lass, you take my breath away. Your wish is my command this eve. You have only to tell me."

His long midnight hair, so black it seemed as blue black as his shadow beard in the amber glow of recessed lights, spilled over one muscled shoulder, falling to his waist, and she sucked in a quick breath. She knew the feel of it sweeping her bare breasts, abrading her nipples, falling lower, across her thighs as he brought her to peak after shuddering peak.

"As if I need to say anything. You know what I want before I know myself." She heard the edge in her voice, knew he heard it too. It unnerved her how well he understood her. Before she knew what she wanted, he was giving it to her.

It made him dangerously addictive.

He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. She wasn't certain she'd ever seen it reach his eyes. They never changed, merely observed and waited. Like a tiger's golden eyes, his were watchful yet aloof, amused yet detached. Hungry eyes. Predator eyes. More than once she'd wanted to ask what those tiger-eyes saw. What judgment they passed, what the hell he seemed to be waiting for, but in the bliss of his hard body against hers she forgot time and again, until she was back at work and it was too late to ask.

She'd been sleeping with him for two months, and knew no more about him now than the day she'd met him in Starbucks, across the street from O'Leary Banks and O'Malley, where she was a partner, thanks partly to her father, the senior O'Malley, and partly to her own ruthlessness. One look at the six foot four, darkly seductive man over the rim of her cafe au lait and she'd known she had to have him. It might have had something to do with the way he'd locked eyes with her as he'd lazily licked whipped cream off his mocha, making her imagine that sexy tongue doing far more intimate things. It might have had something to do with the pure sexual heat he gave off. She knew it had a great deal to do with the danger that rolled off him. Some days she wondered if she'd be defending him as one of her controversial high-profile clients in the months or years to come.

That same day they'd met, they'd rolled across his white Berber carpet, from

fireplace to windows, wrestling silently for the supreme position, until she'd no longer cared how he'd taken her, so long as he had.

With a reputation for a razor-sharp tongue and the mind to back it up, she'd never once turned it on him. She had no idea how he maintained his lavish lifestyle, how he afforded his obscenely expensive collections of art and ancient weapons. She didn't know where he'd been born, or even when his birthday was.

At work, she'd mentally prepare her interrogatory, but inevitably the probing questions stalled on her tongue the moment she saw him. She, the merciless interrogator in a courtroom, tongue-tied in his bedroom. On occasion, tied in infinitely more pleasurable ways. The man was a true master of the erotic.

"Woolgatherin', lass? Or merely deciding how you want me?" he purred.

Katherine wet her lips. How *she wanted him*?

She *wanted* him out of her system. Kept hoping the next time she slept with him, the sex might not be so mind-blowing. The man was far too dangerous to get involved with emotionally. Just yesterday she'd lingered at Mass, praying that she would get over her addiction to him—*please, God, soon*. Yes, he heated her blood, but there was something about him that chilled her soul.

In the meantime—hopelessly fascinated as she was—she knew exactly how she would have him. A strong woman, she was aroused by the strength of a dominant man. She would end the night sprawled over his leather sofa. He would fist his hand in her long hair, drive into her from behind. He would bite the nape of her neck when she came.

She inhaled sharply, took one step forward, and he was on her, dragging her down to the thick carpet. Firm lips, sensual, with a hint of cruelty, closed over hers as he kissed her, golden eyes narrowing.

There was something about him that bordered on terrifying, she thought as he pinned her hands to the floor and rose over her, too beautiful, rife with dark secrets she suspected no woman should ever know—and it made the sex so much more exquisite, that fine edge of danger.

It was her last coherent thought for a long, long time.

Dageus MacKeltar braced his palms against the wall of windows and stared out into the night, his body separated from a plunge of forty-three stories by a pane of glass. The soft buzz of the television was nearly lost in the patter of rain against the windows. A few feet to his right, the sixty-inch screen was reflected in the glistening glass and David Boreanaz stalked broodingly, playing *Angel*, the tortured vampire with a soul. Dageus watched long enough to ascertain it was a repeat, then let his gaze drift back to the night.

The vampire always found at least partial resolution, and Dageus had begun to fear that for him, there would be none. Ever.

Besides, his problem was a little more complicated than Angel's. Angel's problem was a soul. Dageus's problem was a legion of them.

Raking a hand through his hair, he studied the city below. Manhattan: A mere twenty-two square miles. Inhabited by nearly two million people. Then there was the metropolis itself, with seven million people crammed into three hundred square miles.

It was a city of grotesque proportions to a sixteenth-century Highlander, the sheer immensity inconceivable. When he'd first arrived in New York City, he'd walked around the Empire State Building for hours. One hundred and two floors, ten million bricks, the interior thirty-seven million cubic feet, one thousand two hundred and fifty feet tall, it was struck by lightning an average of five hundred times per year.

What manner of man built such monstrosities? he'd wondered. Sheer insanity was what it was, the Highlander had marveled.

And a fine place to call home.

New York City had beckoned the darkness within him. He'd made his lair in the pulsing heart of it.

A man without clan, outcast, nomad, he'd doffed the sixteenth-century man like so much worn plaid and applied his formidable Druid intellect to assimilating the twenty-first century: the new language, the customs, the incredible technology. Though there were still many things he didn't understand—certain words and expressions utterly stumped him, and more often than not he thought in Gaelic,

Latin, or Greek and had to hastily translate—he'd adapted at a remarkable rate.

A man who possessed the esoteric knowledge to open a gate through time, he'd *expected* five centuries to make the world a vastly different place. His understanding of Druid lore, sacred geometry, cosmology, and natural laws of what the twenty-first century called physics had made the wonders of the new world easier for him to fathom.

Not that he didn't frequently gawk. He did. Flying on a plane had fashed him greatly. The clever engineering and fabulous construction of Manhattan's bridges had kept him occupied for days.

The people, the masses of teeming people, bewildered him. He suspected they always would. There was a part of the sixteenth-century Highlander he'd never be able to change. That part would forever miss wide-open expanses of starry sky, leagues and leagues of rolling hills, endless fields of heather, and blithesome and bonny Scots lasses.

He'd ventured to America because he'd hoped that journeying far from his beloved Scotland, from places of power such as the standing stones, might lessen the hold of the ancient evil inside him.

And it *had* affected them, though it had only slowed his descent into darkness, not stopped it. Day by day he continued to change... felt colder, less connected, less fettered by human emotion. More detached god, less man.

Except when he tooped—och, then he was alive. *Then* he felt. Then he was not adrift in a bottomless, dark, and violent sea with naught but a puny bit of driftwood to cling to. Making love to a woman staved off the darkness, replenished his essential humanity. Ever a man of immense appetites, he was now insatiable.

I'm no' entirely dark yet, he growled defiantly to the demons coiled within him. The ones who bided their time in silent certainty, their dark tide eroding him as steadily and surely as the ocean reshaped a rocky shore. He understood their tactics: True evil didn't aggressively assault, it lay coyly hushed and still... and seduced.

And it was there each day, dear evidence of their gains, in the little things he did

without realizing he was doing them till after they were done. Seemingly harmless things like lighting the fire in his hearth with a wave of his hand and a whispered trine, or the opening of a door or blind with a soft murmur. The impatient summoning of one of their conveyances—a taxi—with a glance.

Wee things, mayhap, but he knew such things were far from harmless. Knew that each time he used magic, he turned a shade darker, lost another piece of himself.

Each day was a battle to accomplish three things: use only what magic was absolutely necessary, despite the ever-growing temptation, toop hard and fast and frequently, and continue collecting and searching the tomes wherein might lie the answer to his all-consuming question.

Was there a way to get rid of the dark ones?

If not... well, if not...

He raked a hand through his hair and blew out a deep breath. Eyes narrowed, he watched the lights flickering beyond the park, while behind him, on the couch, the lass slept the dreamless sleep of the utterly exhausted. On the morrow, dark circles would mar the delicate hollows beneath her eyes, etching her features with beguiling fragility. His bed play took a toll on a woman.

Two nights past, Katie had wet her lips and oh-so-casually remarked that he seemed to be waiting for something.

He'd smiled and rolled her onto her stomach. Kissed her sweet, warm, and willing body from head to toe. Dragged his tongue over every inch, then taken her, ridden her, and when he'd finished with her she'd been crying with pleasure.

She'd either forgotten her question or had thought better of it. Katie O'Malley was not a fool. She knew there was more to him than she really wanted to know. She wanted him for sex, nothing more. Which was well and fine, because he was incapable of more.

I wait for my brother, lass, he hadn't said. I wait for the day Drustan wearies of my refusal to return to Scotland. For the day his wife is not so pregnant that he fears to leave her side. For the day he finally acknowledges what he already knows in his heart, though he so desperately dings to my lies: that I am dark as the night sky, with but a few starlike flickers of light left within me.

Och, aye, he was waiting for the day his twin brother would cross the ocean and come for him.

See him for the animal he was.

If he permitted that day to arrive, he knew one of them would die.

A FEW WEEKS LATER

Chapter 2

Across the ocean in not Scotland but England, a land where Drustan MacKeltar had once erroneously claimed the Druids scarce possessed enough knowledge to weave a simple sleep spell, a hushed and urgent conversation was taking place.

"Have you made contact?"

"I dare not, Simon. The transformation is not yet complete."

"But it has been many months since the Draghar took him!"

"He is a Keltar. Though he cannot win, still he resists. It is the power that will corrupt him, and he refuses to use it."

A long silence. Then Simon said, "We have waited thousands of years for their return, as was promised us in the Prophecy. I weary of waiting. Push him. Give him reason to *need* the power, we will not lose the battle this time."

A quick nod. "I will take care of it."

"Be subtle, Giles. Do not yet alert him to our existence. When the time is right, I will do so. And should anything go wrong... well, you know what to do."

Another quick nod, an anticipatory smile, a flutter of cloth and his companion was gone, leaving him alone in the circle of stones beneath a fiery English dawn.

The man who'd given the order, Simon Barton-Drew, master of the Druid sect of the Draghar, leaned back against a mossy stone, absently stroking the winged-serpent tattoo on his neck, his gaze skimming the ancient monoliths. A tall, lean man with salt-and-pepper hair, a narrow foxlike face and restless gray eyes that missed nothing, he was honored that such an auspicious moment had come in his hour of rule. He'd been waiting thirty-two years for this moment, since the birth of his first son, which had coincided with the day he'd been initiated into the sect's inner sanctum. There were those like the Keltar, who served the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and there were those like himself, who served the Draghar. The Druid sect of the Draghar had kept the faith for thousands of years, handing the Prophecy down from one generation to the next: the promise of the return of their ancient leaders, the promise of the one who would lead them to glory. The

one who would take back all the power the Tuatha Dé Danaan had stolen from them so long ago.

He smiled. How fitting that one of the Tuatha Dé's own cherished Keltar now held within him the power of the ancient Draghar—the league of thirteen most powerful Druids that had ever lived. How poetic that one of the Tuatha Dé's very own would finally destroy them.

And reclaim the Druids' rightful place in the world.

Not as the much maligned, tree-hugging, mistletoe-gathering fools they'd permitted the world to believe them to be.

But as rulers of mankind.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," Chloe Zanders snapped, raking her long curly hair from her face with both hands. "You want me to take the third Book of Manannan—and yes, I know it's only a reproduction of a portion of the original, but it's still priceless—to some man on the East Side who's probably going to eat *popcorn* while he paws through it? It's not as if he might actually read it. The parts that aren't in Latin are in old Gaelic." Fists at her waist, she glared up at her boss, one of several cocurators of the medieval collection housed in The Cloisters and The Met. "What does he want it for? Did he say?"

"I didn't ask," Tom replied, shrugging.

"Oh, that's just great. You didn't ask." Chloe shook her head disbelievingly. Though the copy her fingers currently rested delicately upon was not illuminated, and was a mere five centuries old—nearly a thousand years younger than the original texts that resided in the National Museum of Ireland—it was a sacred bit of history, demanding utmost reverence and respect.

Not to be toted about the city, entrusted to the hands of a stranger.

"How much did he donate?" she asked irritably. She knew a bribe of sorts must have changed hands. One didn't "check things out" of The Cloisters any more than one could stroll up to Trinity College and ask to borrow the Book of Kells.

"A jeweled fifteenth-century *skean dhu* and a priceless Damascus blade," Tom said, smiling beatifically. "The

Damascus dates to the Crusades. Both have been authenticated."

A delicate brow rose. Awe made short work of outrage. "Wow. Really?" A *skean dhu*! Her fingers curled in anticipation. "Do you have them already?"

Antiquities; she loved them one and all, from the single rosary bead with the entire scene of The Passion carved on it, to the Unicorn Tapestries, to the splendid collection of medieval blades.

But she especially loved all things Scottish, as they reminded her of the grandfather who'd raised her. When her parents died in a car accident, Evan MacGregor swooped in and took the broken four-year-old to a new home in Kansas. Proud of his heritage, endowed with a passionate Scots temperament, he imbued her with his love for all things Celtic. It was a dream of hers to one day journey to Glengarry, to see the town in which he'd been born, to visit the church in which he'd wed Gran, to stroll the heathery moors beneath a silvery moon. She had her passport ready, waiting for that lovely stamp; she just had to save enough money.

It might take her another year or two, especially now with the cost of living in New York, but she would get there. And she couldn't wait. As a child she'd been lulled to sleep on countless nights by her grandfather's soft burr, as he'd woven fantastic tales of his homeland. When he died five years ago she'd been devastated. Sometimes, alone at night in The Cloisters, she found herself talking aloud to him, knowing that—though he would have hated city life even more than she did—he would have loved her choice of career. Preserving the artifacts and the old ways.

Her eyes narrowed as Tom's laughter shattered her reverie. He was chuckling over her swift transition from outrage to wonder. She caught herself and pasted a scowl on her face again. It wasn't hard. A stranger was going to be touching a priceless text. Unsupervised. Who knew what might happen to it?

"Yes, I have them already, Chloe. And I didn't ask your opinion of my methods. Your job is to manage the records—"

"Tom, I have my master's in ancient civilizations and speak as many languages as you do. You've always said my opinion counts. Does it or doesn't it?"

"Of course it counts, Chloe," Tom said, sobering swiftly. He removed his glasses

and began polishing them with a tie that sported its usual accumulation of coffee stains and jelly-donut crumbs. "But if I hadn't agreed, he was going to donate the blades to the Royal Museum of Scotland. You know how stiff the competition is for quality artifacts. You understand the politics. The man is wealthy, he's generous, and he has quite a collection. We might be able to coax him to draw up some sort of bequest upon his death. If he wants a few days with a five-hundred-year-old text, one of the lesser-valued ones at that, he's going to get it."

"If he so much as gets *one* popcorn smudge on the pages, I'm going to kill him."

"Precisely why I coaxed you here to work for me, Chloe; you love these old things as much as I do. And I acquired two more treasures today, so be a dear and *deliver the text*."

Chloe snorted. Tom knew her too well. He'd been her professor of medieval history at the University of Kansas before he'd assumed a position as cocurator. A year ago he'd tracked her down where she'd been working at a depressing excuse for a museum in Kansas, and offered her a job. Though it had been hard to leave the home she'd grown up in, filled with so many memories, a chance to work at The Cloisters was not to be missed, no matter the extreme culture shock she'd suffered. New York was sleek and hungry and worldly, and in the sophisticated thick of it, the girl from rural Kansas felt hopelessly gauche.

"What, am I supposed to just walk outside with this thing tucked under my arm? With the Gaulish Ghost running around out there?" Lately there'd been a rash of thefts of Celtic manuscripts from private collections. The media had dubbed the thief the Gaulish Ghost because he stole only Celtic items and left no clues behind, appearing and disappearing like a wraith.

"Have Amelia package it up for you. My car's waiting out front. Bill has the man's name and address. He'll drive you there and circle the block while you run it up. And don't harass the man when you deliver it," he added.

Chloe rolled her eyes and sighed, but gently collected the text. As she was walking out, Thomas said, "When you get back I'll show you the blades, Chloe."

His tone was soothing but amused, and it pissed her off. He *knew* she would hurry back to see them. Knew she would overlook his spurious acquisition methods one more time.

"Bribery. Abject bribery," she muttered. "And it *won't* make me approve of what you do." But already she was aching to touch them. To run a finger down the cool metal, to dream of ancient times and ancient places.

Nurtured on Midwest values, an idealist to the core, Chloe Zanders had a weakness, and Tom knew it. Put something ancient in her hands and she was seduced.

And if it was ancient *and* Scottish? Sheesh, she was a goner.

Some days Dageus felt as ancient as the evil within him.

As he hailed a cab to take him to The Cloisters to pick up a copy of one of the last tomes in New York that he needed to check, he didn't notice the fascinated glances women walking down the sidewalk turned his way. Didn't realize that, even in a metropolis that teemed with diversity, he stood out. It was nothing he said or did; to all appearances he was but another wealthy, sinfully gorgeous man. It was simply the essence of the man. The way he moved. His every gesture exuded power, something dark and... forbidden. He was sexual in a way that made women think of deeply repressed fantasies therapists and feminists alike would cringe to hear tell of.

But he realized none of that. His thoughts were far away, still mulling over the nonsense penned in the Book of Leinster.

Och, what he wouldn't give for his da's library.

In lieu of it, he'd been systematically obtaining what manuscripts still existed, exhausting his present possibilities before pursuing riskier ones. Risky, like setting foot on the isles of his ancestors again, a thing fast seeming inevitable.

Thinking of risk, he made a mental note to return some of the volumes he'd "borrowed" from private collections when bribes had failed. It wouldn't do to have them lying about too long.

He glanced up at the clock above the bank. Twelve forty-five. The cocurator of The Cloisters had assured him he would have the text delivered first thing that morn, but it hadn't arrived and Dageus was weary of waiting.

He needed information, *accurate* information about the Keltar's ancient

benefactors, the Tuatha Dé Danaan, those "gods and not gods," as the Book of the Dun Cow called them. They were the ones who had originally imprisoned the dark Druids in the in-between, hence it followed that there was a way to reimprison them.

It was imperative he find that way.

As he eased into the cab—a torturous fit for a man of his height and breadth—his attention was caught by a lass who was stepping from a car at the curb in front of them.

She was different, and it was that difference that drew his eye. She had none of the city's polish and was all the lovelier for it. Refreshingly tousled, delightfully free of the artifice with which modern women enhanced their faces, she was a vision.

"Wait," he growled at the driver, watching her hungrily.

His every sense heightened painfully. His hands fisted as desire, never sated, flooded him.

Somewhere in her ancestry the lass had Scots blood. It was there in the curly waves of copper-and-blond hair that tumbled about a delicate face with a surprisingly strong jaw. It was there in the peaches-and-cream complexion and the huge aquamarine eyes—eyes that still regarded the world with wonder, he noticed with a faintly mocking smile. It was there in a fire that simmered just beneath the surface of her flawless skin. Wee, lusciously plump where it counted, with a trim waist and shapely legs hugged by a snug skirt, the lass was an exiled Highlander's dream.

He wet his lips and stared, making a noise deep in his throat that was more animal than human.

When she leaned back in through the open window of the car to say something to the driver, the back of her skirt rode up a few inches. He inhaled sharply, envisioning himself behind her. His entire body went tight with lust.

Christ, she was lovely. Lush curves that could make a dead man stir.

She leaned forward a smidgen, showing more of that sweet curve of the back of

her thigh.

His mouth went ferociously dry.

No' for me, he warned himself, gritting his teeth and shifting to lessen the pressure on his suddenly, painfully hard cock. He took only experienced lasses to his bed. Lasses far older in both mind and body. Not reeking, as she did, of innocence. Of bright dreams and a bonny future.

Sleek and worldly, with jaded palates and cynical hearts—they were the ones a man could tumble and leave with a bauble in the morn, no worse for the wear.

She was the kind a man kept.

"Go," he murmured to the driver, forcing his gaze away.

Chloe tapped her foot impatiently, leaning against the wall beside the call-desk. The blasted man wasn't there. She'd been waiting fifteen minutes, hoping he might appear. A few moments ago she'd finally told Bill to go on without her, that she'd catch a cab back to The Cloisters and expense it to the department.

She drummed her fingers impatiently on the counter. She just wanted to deliver her parcel and go. The sooner she got rid of it, the sooner she could forget her part in the whole sordid affair.

It occurred to her that unless she could find an alternative, she was probably going to end up wasting the rest of her day. A man who lived in the East 70s in such affluence was a man accustomed to having others await his convenience.

Glancing about, she spied a possible alternative. Taking a deep breath and smoothing her suit, she tucked the parcel beneath her arm and strode briskly across the elegant grand foyer to the security desk. Two beefy men in crisp black-and-white uniforms snapped to attention as she approached.

When she'd first arrived in New York last year, she'd known instantly that she would never be in the same league with city women. Polished and chic, they were Mercedes and BMWs and Jaguars, and Chloe Zanders was a... Jeep, or maybe a Toyota Highlander on a good day. Her purse never matched her shoes—she was lucky if her *shoe* matched her shoe. Still, she believed in working with what one had, so she did her best to put a little feminine charm into her walk,

praying she wouldn't break an ankle.

"I have a delivery for Mr. MacKeltar," she announced, curving her lips in what she hoped was a flirtatious smile, trying to soften them up enough that they'd let her go drop the blasted thing off where it would be a bit more secure. No way she was giving it to the pimply teen behind the call-desk. Nor to these beefy brutes.

Two leering gazes swept her from head to toe. "I'm sure you do, honey," the blond man drawled. He gave her another thorough look. "You're not his usual type though."

"Mr. MacKeltar gets *lots* of deliveries," his dark-haired companion smirked.

Oh, great. Just great. The man's a womanizer. Popcorn and God-only-knows what else on the pages. Grr.

But she supposed she should be thankful, she told herself a few minutes later, as she rode the elevator up to the forty-third floor. They'd let her go up to the penthouse level unescorted, which was astounding in a luxury East-Side property.

Leave it in his anteroom; it's secure enough, the blond had said, though his smarmy gaze had clearly said that he believed the real package was *her*, and he didn't expect to see her again for days, at least.

If Chloe had only known how true that was—that indeed he wouldn't be seeing her again for days—she'd *never* have gotten on that elevator.

Later, she would also reflect that if only the door hadn't been unlocked, she would have been fine. But when she arrived in Mr. MacKeltar's anteroom, which was overflowing with exotic fresh flowers and furnished with elegant chairs and magnificent rugs, all she'd been able to think was that Security might let some bimbo up, just as they had her, and said bimbo might tear a page out of the priceless text to wad up her chewing gum in, or something equally sacrilegious.

So, sighing, she smoothed her hair and tried one of the double doors.

It slid silently open on—heavens, were those gold-plated hinges? She caught sight of her gaping reflection in one. Some people had more money than sense.

Just *one* of those stupid hinges would pay the rent on her tiny efficiency for months.

Shaking her head, she stepped inside and cleared her throat. "Hello?" she called, as it occurred to her that it might be unlocked because he'd left one of his apparently myriad women there.

"Hello, hello!" she called again.

Silence.

Luxury. Like she'd never seen.

She glanced about, and *still* might have been okay if she hadn't spotted the glorious Scottish claymore hanging above the fireplace in the living room. It drew her like a moth to the flame.

"Oh, you gorgeous, lovely, splendid little thing, you," she gushed, hurrying over to it, promising herself she was just going to place the text on the marble coffee table, take a quick glance, and leave.

Twenty minutes later, she was in the midst of a thorough exploration of his home, her heart hammering with nervousness, yet too enthralled to stop.

"How *dare* he leave his door unlocked?" she grumbled, frowning at a magnificent medieval broadsword. Casually propped against the wall in a corner. Ripe for the plucking. Though Chloe prided herself on sound morals, she suffered a shocking urge to tuck it beneath her arm and make a run for it.

The place was full of artifacts—all Celtic at that! Scottish weapons dating back to the fifteenth century, if she didn't miss her guess, and she rarely did, adorned a wall in his library. Priceless Scots regalia: sporran, badge, and brooches in mint condition lay beside a pile of ancient coins on a desk.

She touched, she examined, she shook her head disbelievingly.

Where previously she'd felt nothing but distaste for the man, she was growing fonder of him by the moment, shamelessly seduced by his excellent taste.

And growing more curious about him with each new discovery.

No photos, she noticed, glancing around the rooms. Not one. She'd love to know what the guy looked like.

Dageus MacKeltar. What a name.

Nothing against Zanders, Grandda had often said, *it's a fine name, but it's as easy to fall in love with a Scotsman as an Englishman, lass*. A weighty pause. A harumph. Then, inevitable as sunrise, *Easier, actually*.

She smiled, remembering how he'd endlessly encouraged her to get a "proper" last name for herself.

Her smile froze as she stepped into the bedroom.

Her desire to know what he looked like escalated into obsession territory.

His bedroom, his sinful, decadent bedroom, with the enormous hand-carved, curtained bed covered with silks and velvets, with the exquisitely tiled fireplace, the black marble Jacuzzi in which one might sit sipping champagne, gazing down over Manhattan through a wall of windows. Dozens of candles surrounded the tub. Two glasses had been carelessly knocked over on the Berber carpet.

His scent lingered in the room, scent of man and spice and virility.

Her heart pounded as the enormity of what she was doing occurred to her. She was snooping through a very wealthy man's penthouse, currently standing in the man's bedroom, for heaven's sake! In his very lair where he seduced his women.

And from the looks of things, he had seduction down to a fine art.

Virgin wool carpet, black velvet draping the monstrous bed, silk sheets beneath a sumptuous beaded velvet coverlet, ornate museum-worthy mirrors framed in silver and obsidian.

Despite the warning bells going off in her head, she couldn't seem to make herself leave. Mesmerized, she opened a closet, trailing her fingers over fine hand-tailored clothing, inhaling the subtle, undeniably sexual scent of the man. Exquisite Italian shoes and boots lined the floor.

She began conjuring a fantasy image of him.

He would be tall (she was *not* having short babies!) and handsome, with a nice body, though not too exceptional, and a husky burr. He would be intelligent, speak several languages, (so he could purr Gaelic love words in her ear), but not too polished, a little rough around the edges.

Forget to shave, things like that. He would be a little introverted and sweet. He would like short, curvy women whose noses were in books so much that they forgot to pluck their brows and comb their hair and put on makeup. Women whose shoes didn't always match.

As if, the voice of reason rudely popped her fantasy bubble. *The guy downstairs said you weren't his usual type. Now get out of here, Zanders.*

And it still might not have been too late, she *still* might have escaped had she not moved closer to that sinful bed, peeking curiously and with no small amount of fascination at the silky scarves knotted about bedposts the size of small tree trunks.

Corn-fed-Kansas Chloe was shocked. Never-gone-all-the-way-with-a-man Chloe was... suddenly breathing very shallowly, to say the least.

Shakily averting her gaze, and backing away on legs that wobbled, she nearly overlooked the corner of the book poking out from beneath his bed.

But Chloe never missed a book. An ancient one at that.

Moments later, skirt twisted around her hips, purse abandoned on a chair, suit jacket tossed on the floor, she'd dug out his stash: seven medieval volumes.

All of which had been recently reported stolen by various collectors.

Good God—she was in the lair of the nefarious Gaulish Ghost! And it was no wonder he had so many artifacts: He *stole* whatever he wanted.

On her hands and knees, rooting about beneath his bed for more evidence of his heinous crimes, Chloe Zanders' opinion of the man had taken a sharp turn for the worse. "Womanizing, *thieving* creep," she muttered under her breath. "Unbelievable."

Gingerly, with thumb and tip of forefinger, she flung a black lace thong out from

under the bed. *Eww*. Condom wrapper. Condom wrapper. Condom wrapper. *Sheesh! How many people lived here?*

Magnum, the wrapper advertised smugly, *for the Extra-Large Man*.

Chloe blinked.

"I've no' yet tried it beneath the bed, lass," a deep Scots burr purred behind her, "but if 'tis your preference... and the rest of you is half as lovely as what I'm seeing... I might be persuaded to oblige."

Her heart stopped beating.

She froze, her brain stuttering over the fight or flight dilemma. At five foot three, fight wasn't the most promising option. Unfortunately, her brain failed to process the fact that she was still under the bed when it downloaded the surge of adrenaline necessary to flee, so she succeeded only in cracking the back of her head against the solid wood frame.

Woozy, seeing stars, she began to hiccup—a mortifying thing that *always* happened to her when she got nervous, as if simply being nervous weren't bad enough.

She didn't have to back out from under the bed to know she was in very, very deep shit.

Chapter 3

A strong hand clamped around her ankle, and Chloe let out a little scream.

She tried for a big scream, but an inconvenient hiccup turned it into an imploded screech that left her gasping.

Ruthlessly, he tugged her from beneath his bed.

Frantically, she grabbed her skirt with both hands, trying to keep it from bunching up around her waist as she slid inexorably backward. Last thing she wanted to do was make an appearance bare bottom first. Her panty line showed under this particular skirt (which was one reason she didn't wear it often, coupled with the fact that she'd gained a little weight and it was snug), so she'd worn hose with no panties. Not something she did frequently. Figured she'd have to do it today.

When she was clear of the bed, he dropped her ankle.

She lay on her tummy on the carpet, hiccupping and trying desperately to gather her wits.

He was behind her, she could *feel* him staring at her. In silence.

In terrible, awful, disconcerting silence.

Swallowing a hiccup, unable to summon the nerve to look behind her, she said brightly, in her breathiest ditz voice, "*Je ne parle pas anglais. Parlez-vous francais?*" Then with a stilted French accent (pretending to be dumb in Latin seemed a bit far-fetched to her), "Maid Service!" Hiccup. "I clean zee bedroom, *oui?*" Hiccup.

Nothing. Still silence behind her.

She was going to have to look at him.

Gingerly rising to her hands and knees, she smoothed her skirt, pushed herself into a sitting position, then managed to stand on trembling legs. Still too distraught to face the man, she focused on an empty glass and plate atop a table

beside the bed and, determined to convince him she was Maid Service, pointed at it, chirping, "Dirtee dish-es. *Vous aimez* I wash, *oui*?"

Hiccup.

Heavy, ponderous silence. A rustling sound. What *was* he doing?

Taking deep breaths, she slowly turned. And all the blood drained from her face. She noticed two things at once, one absolutely irrelevant, the other terribly significant: He was the most breathtakingly gorgeous man she'd ever seen in her life, and he was holding her purse in one hand, slipping the battery out of her cell phone with the other.

He dropped the battery on the floor and crushed it beneath his boot.

"M-M-Maid Service?" she squeaked, then lapsed into French again, too nervous to do more than babble her way through, amid hiccups, elementary weather conversation she'd learned in freshman French, but he wouldn't know that.

"Actually, it's *no*' raining, lass," he said dryly in English with a pronounced Scots burr. "Though admittedly 'tis one of the few moments it hasn't been in the past week."

Chloe's heart plummeted to her toes. Oh, blast it—she should have tried Greek!

"Chloe Zanders," he said, tossing her license at her. She was too stunned to catch it; it bounced off her and dropped to the floor.

Shit. *Merde. Bloody hell.*

"From The Cloisters. I met your employer a quarter hour past. He said you awaited me here. I would never have guessed he meant in my bed." Dangerous eyes. Mesmerizing eyes. They locked with hers and she couldn't look away.

"Under the bed," she babbled, abandoning her overblown French accent. "I was *under* the bed, not in it."

His sensual mouth curved with a hint of a smile. The mild amusement did not touch his eyes.

Oh, God, she thought, staring wide-eyed. Her life was quite probably in danger

and all she could do was stare. The man was beautiful. Impossibly so. Terrifyingly so. She'd never seen a man like him before. He was her every darkest fantasy sprung to life. Scottish blood was stamped all over his chiseled features.

Clad in black trousers, black boots, a cream fisherman's sweater, and a buttery-soft leather coat, he had silky black-as-midnight hair that was pulled back at his nape from a savagely masculine face. Firm, sensual lips, the lower one much fuller than the upper, proud, aristocratic nose, dark, slanted brows, bone-structure a model would die for. A perfectly sculpted dusting of a beard shadowed his perfect jaw.

Six foot four, at least, she'd guess. Powerfully built. The grace of an animal.

The exotic golden eyes of a tiger.

She suddenly felt like so much fresh meat.

" 'Twould seem we have a wee bit of a problem, lass," he said with silky menace, stepping toward her.

Her hiccups vanished instantly. Sheer terror could do that. Better than a spoonful of sugar or a paper bag anytime.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she lied through her teeth. "I just came to deliver the text and I'm so sorry I got distracted by all your lovely treasures, and I sincerely apologize for invading your home, but Tom is expecting me back, actually Bill is waiting just downstairs for me, and I don't see any problem." She gazed wide-eyed at him and concentrated on looking soft and stupid and feminine. "What problem?" Demure batting of the lashes. "There's no problem."

He said nothing, merely let his gaze drop to the stolen texts scattered around her feet amid thongs and condom wrappers.

She glanced down too. "Well, yes, you certainly do have an active love life," she murmured vacuously. "But I won't hold that against you." *Womanizer!*

The look he gave her made the fine hair on the nape of her neck stand on end. His gaze drifted meaningfully to the tomes again.

"Oh! You mean the books. So you like books," she said lightly. "No big." She shrugged.

Again he said nothing, merely held her with that intense golden gaze. God, the man was stunning! Made her feel like... like that Rene Russo in *The Thomas Crown Affair*—ready to throw in with the thief. Run off to exotic lands. Stroll about topless on a terrace overlooking the sea. Live beyond the law. Pet his artifacts when she wasn't petting him.

"Och, lass," he said, shaking his head, "I'm no' a fool, so doona insult me with lies. 'Tis plain to see you know precisely what they are. *And* whence they came," he added gently.

Gentle from him was dangerous. She knew it instinctively. Gentle from this man meant he was about to do something she really *really* wasn't going to like.

And he did.

Crowding her with his powerful body, he backed her toward the bed and gave her a light push that sent her sprawling backward across it.

With the grace of a tiger he followed her down, pinning her to the mattress beneath him.

"I swear," she babbled hastily, "I won't tell a soul. I don't care. It's okay with me if you have them. I have absolutely no desire to go to the police or anything like that. I don't even *like* the police. Police and me have never gotten along. They gave me a ticket once for going forty-eight in a forty-five zone; how could I possibly like them after that? It doesn't matter one *whit* to me if you steal half The Met's medieval collection, I mean, really, they have six thousand pieces, so who's going to notice a few missing? I am an *excellent* secret-keeper," she practically screeched. "I definitely, most assuredly, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to... er, will not breathe the teeniest word. Mum. Muni's the word. And you can take that to the—

His lips took the rest of her words along with her breath.

Oh, *yeah. Rene Russo here.*

Those sensual lips closed over hers, brushing lightly, tasting. But not taking.

And for an absolutely insane moment, she wanted him to take. Wanted him to crush her mouth in a hard, starving, bruising kiss and help her find that red-hot button of love that had never once hit lukewarm. The man rilled a woman's head with fantasies she would have *sworn* she didn't have. Her traitorous lips parted beneath his. Fear, she told herself, it was just that fear could translate swiftly into arousal. She'd heard about people facing certain death suddenly getting a sexual charge that just wouldn't quit.

So bizarrely, intensely aroused, she didn't even notice that he was knotting a scarf around her wrist, until he swept it tight, and it was too late and she was tied to his bed. His sinful, decadent bed. Moving with inhuman grace and suddenness, he deftly knotted her other wrist to the far post.

She opened her mouth to scream, but he caught it with one powerful hand. Lying atop her, staring dead into her eyes, he said quietly, carefully, enunciating each word, "If you scream, I will be forced to gag you. I prefer not to, lass. It bears considering that no one can hear you up here anyway. 'Tis your choice. What will it be?" He lifted his hand infinitesimally, just enough that he might hear her reply.

"D-don't hurt me," she whispered.

"I have no intention of hurting you, lass."

But you are, she was about to say, then realized with a flush that that hard thing digging into her hip was not a gun, but a magnum of another sort entirely.

He must have seen something in her eyes, because he raised himself slightly.

Which meant, she concluded with a huge flood of relief, that he wasn't going to rape her. A rapist would have shifted a few inches to the right, not raised his hips.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to keep you for a time, lass. But you'll suffer no harm at my hands. Mind you, however, one scream, one loud noise, and you're gagged."

There was no mercy in his gaze. She knew he meant it. She could either be bound, or bound and gagged.

She shook her head, then nodded, befuddled by whether she was supposed to say yes or no. "Won't scream," she promised stiffly. *No one can hear you up here anyway.* God, that was probably true. On the penthouse level walls were thick, there was no one above, and the elite were given wide berth unless they requested something. She could probably scream her *head* off, and no one would come.

"There's a bonny lass," he said, lifting her head with a palm and slipping a plump pillow beneath it.

Then, in one swift, graceful move, he pushed away from the bed and stalked from the bedroom, dosing the door behind him, leaving her alone, tied by silken scarves to the sinful bed of the Gaulish Ghost.

She was the kind a man kept.

Dageus cursed softly in five languages, recalling his earlier thought, palming himself roughly through his trews. It didn't help. Indeed, made it worse. Happy for any attention.

Scowling, he went to stand before the wall of windows, gazing sightlessly out over the city.

He'd handled that badly. He'd frightened her. But he'd not been able to offer her soothing words, for he'd had to get away from her, quickly, lest he give his blood what it had been howling for. Though he told himself he'd pressed his lips to hers only to distract her while he bound her, he'd kissed her because he'd needed to, because he'd quite simply not been able *not* to. It had been a brief, sweet taste without tongue, for had he crossed that barrier, he'd have been lost. Lying atop her had been sheer agony, feeling the darkness rustle and flex within him, knowing tooping her would drive it back. Feeling cold and hungry, trying desperately to be human and kind.

He'd gone to The Cloisters, pleased with how firmly he'd put all thoughts of the Scots lass from his mind. There, he'd discovered the parcel was en route to him, while he was en route to it. The cocurator had, with much fawning and gushing, assured him Chloe Zanders would be waiting for him, as someone named Bill had already returned, having left her at his address.

But the lass hadn't been downstairs and Security had, with much winking and grinning, told him that his "delivery" awaited him upstairs.

Not finding the woman from the museum in the anteroom, he'd glanced about the living room, then heard noises upstairs.

He'd loped swiftly up the stairs and walked into his bedroom, only to discover the loveliest pair of legs he'd ever seen, poking out from beneath his bed. Succulent thighs he wanted to nip with his teeth, slender ankles, pretty little feet clad in delicate high heels.

Beautiful feminine legs. Bed.

Those two things in close proximity had a tendency to divert all the blood from his brain.

The legs had looked alarmingly familiar and he'd assured himself he was imagining things.

Then he'd plucked her out by an ankle and confirmed the identity of the lass attached to those heavenly legs, and his blood had simmered to a boil.

Staring down at her shapely backside as she'd lain unmoving on her tummy, a legion of fantasies riding him hard, it had taken him several moments to realize what she was lying amid.

The "borrowed" books.

The last thing he needed was the twenty-first century's law enforcers hunting him down. He had much to do, and too little time in which to do it. He couldn't afford complications.

He wasn't ready to leave Manhattan just yet. There were two final texts he needed to check.

By Amergin—he'd nearly been done! A few days at most. He didn't need this! Why now?

He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. Repeated it several times.

He'd had no choice, he assured himself. He had been wise to immediately

restrain her. For the next few days, until he finished, he was simply going to have to hold her captive.

Though he could use magic, a memory spell to make her forget what she'd seen, he wasn't willing to risk it. Not only were memory spells tricky and oft damaging things, taking more memory than intended, he used magic only if there was no human way to handle the situation. He knew what it cost him each time. Tiny spells to obtain the texts he needed were one thing.

Nay. No magic. The lass would have to endure a short time of comfortable captivity while he finished translating the final tomes, then he would leave, and release her somewhere along the way.

Along the way to where? his conscience demanded. *Do you finally accept that you're going to have to return?*

He sighed. The past few months had confirmed what he'd suspected; there were only two places he might find the information he needed: in Ireland's and Scotland's museums, or in the MacKeltar library.

And the MacKeltar library was by far the best bet.

He'd been avoiding it at all cost, for it was fraught with myriad and varied perils. Not only did the land of his ancestors make the darkness inside him stronger, he dreaded facing his twin brother. Admitting that he'd lied. Admitting what he was.

Arguing bitterly with his da, Silvan, seeing the anger and disappointment in his eyes had been bad enough, Dageus wasn't certain he'd ever be ready to face his twin brother—the brother who'd never broken a vow in his life.

Since the eve he'd broken his oath and turned dark, Dageus had not once worn the colors of his clan, though a scrap of well-worn Keltar plaid was tucked beneath his pillow. Some evenings, after he'd seen whichever woman it was into a cab (though he tooped many, he shared his bed with none), he would dose his hand around it, shut his eyes and pretend he was in the Highlands again. A simple man, naught more.

All he wanted was to find a way to fix the problem, to get rid of the dark ones himself. Then he would regain his honor. *Then* he could proudly face his brother and reclaim his heritage.

If you wait much longer, that nagging voice warned, you may no longer care to reclaim it. You may no longer even understand what it means.

He forced his thoughts away from such an unpleasant bent, and they drifted with alarming intensity straight back to the lass tied to his bed. Tied vulnerably and helplessly to his bed.

Dangerous thought, that. Seemed all he ever had anymore were dangerous thoughts.

Raking a hand through his hair, he forced his attention to the text she'd left on the coffee table, refusing to dwell on the disconcerting fact that a part of him had taken one look at the lass in such proximity to his bed and said simply: *Mine*.

As if from the moment he'd seen her, that he would claim her had been as certain as the morrow's dawn.

Several hours later, Chloe's volatile emotions had run the gamut. She'd pretty much exhausted fear, plunged with effusive glee, for a time, into outrage at her captor, and was now thoroughly disgusted at herself for her impetuous curiosity.

Curious as a wee kitten, you are, but a cat has nine lives, Chloe, Grandda used to say. You have but one. Beware where it leads you.

You can say that again, she thought, listening intently to see if she could hear the thief moving around out there. His penthouse had one of those music systems that was piped into every room and, after an initial painfully loud blast of a bass-heavy song that sounded suspiciously like that Nine Inch Nail's song that had been banned from airplay a few years ago, he'd put on classical music. She'd been treated to a medley of violin concertos for the past few hours. If it was intended to soothe her, it was failing.

It didn't help that her nose itched and the only way she could scratch it was to bury her face in his pillows and bob her head.

She wondered how much time would have to pass before Bill and Tom would start to wonder where she'd gotten off to. Surely they would come looking for her, wouldn't they?

Not.

Though both would say, "but Chloe never deviates from routine," neither would question or accuse Dageus MacKeltar. After all, who in their right mind would believe the man anything but a wealthy art collector? If asked, her captor would simply say, "No, she dropped it off and left, and I have no idea where she went." And

Tom would believe, and no one would push, because men like Dageus MacKeltar weren't the kind one questioned or pushed. No one would ever imagine him a kidnapper and a thief. *She* was the only one who knew differently, and only because she'd gotten all foolishly infatuated with his artifacts and gone snooping through his bedroom.

No, although Tom might send Bill around this afternoon, or more likely tomorrow, asking when Chloe had left, it would end there. In a day or two, she imagined Tom would really start to worry, call her at home, stop by, even report her missing to the police, but there were oodles of unexplained disappearances in New York all the time.

Deep shit, indeed.

With a sigh, she puffed a ticklish strand of hair out of her face and did the nose-in-pillow thing again. He smelled good, the dirty rotten scoundrel. Womanizing, bullying, amoral, larcenous, vilest-of-the-vile, debaucher of innocent texts.

"Thief," she muttered with a little scowl.

She inhaled, then caught herself. She was not going to appreciate his scent. She was *not* going to appreciate a darned thing about him.

Sighing, she wriggled her way up the bed until she was leaning, in a mostly upright position, against the headboard.

She was tied to a strange man's bed. A criminal to boot.

"Chloe Zanders, you've got all kinds of problems," she murmured, testing the silken bonds for the hundredth time. A little play, no give. The man knew how to tie knots.

Why hadn't he hurt her? she wondered. And since he hadn't, just what did he plan to do with her? The facts were pretty simple and quite horrifying; she'd

managed to stumble into the lair of an expert, slick, thoroughly top-notch thief. Not a petty thief or a bank robber, but a master thief who broke into impossible places and stole fabulous treasures.

This was not small-time stuff.

There weren't thousands riding on her silence, but *millions*.

She shivered. That dismal thought could send her straight into hysterics, or at the least, a potentially terminal bout of hiccups.

Desperate for a distraction, she wriggled as far to the edge of the bed as the bonds permitted, and peered down at the stolen texts.

She sighed longingly, aching to touch. Though not originals—any originals worth having were securely tucked away in the Royal Irish Academy or Trinity College Library—they were superb late-medieval copies. One of them had fallen open, revealing a lovely page of Irish majuscule script, the capital letters gloriously embellished with the intricate interlacing knotwork for which the Celts were renowned.

There was a copy of *Lebor Laignech* (the Book of Leinster), *Lebor na hUidre* (the Book of the Dun Cow), *Lebor Gabala Erenn* (the Book of Invasions), and several lesser texts from the Mythological Cycle.

Fascinating. All of them about the earliest days of fere, or Ireland. Full of tales of the Partholonians, the Nemedians, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and the Milesians. Rich in legend and magic, and endlessly disputed by scholars.

Why did he want them? Was he selling them to fund his fabulous lifestyle? Chloe knew there were private collectors who didn't give a damn where the item came from, so long as they could own it. There was always a market for stolen artifacts.

But, she puzzled, he had only Celtic artifacts. And she knew for a fact that most of the collections he'd raided for those texts boasted far more valuable items from many different cultures. Items he'd not taken.

Which meant, for whatever reason, that he was highly selective and not motivated solely by the value of the artifact.

She shook her head, befuddled. It didn't make any sense. What thief wasn't motivated by the value of the artifact? What thief stole a lesser-valued text and left dozens of more valuable items untouched once he'd gone to the trouble of breaching security? And *how* was he managing to breach security? The collections he'd robbed had some of the most sophisticated anti-theft systems in the world, requiring sheer genius to penetrate.

The door suddenly opened, and she scrunched hastily away from the edge of the bed, donning her most innocent expression.

"Are you hungry, lass?" he said in his deep burr, glancing around the partially opened door at her.

"Wh-what?" Chloe blinked. Not only was the dastardly man not killing her, he was going to feed her?

"Are you hungry? I was preparing food for myself and it occurred to me that mayhap you were hungry."

Chloe puzzled over that for a moment. Was she hungry? She was completely freaked out. She was going to have to use the bathroom soon. Her nose itched furiously and her skirt was getting all bunched up again.

And in the midst of it all, yes, she was hungry.

"Uh-huh," she said warily.

Only after he left did it occur to her that maybe that was how he was going to get rid of her—by poisoning her!

Chapter 4

Poached salmon, stovies and cullen skink. A salad tossed with nuts and cranberries. A plate of Scottish cheeses, shortbread and marmalade. Sparkling wine in Baccarat goblets.

Death by scrumptious Scots cuisine and fine crystal? "I thought I'd get a peanut butter sandwich or something," Chloe said warily.

Dageus placed the final dish on the bed and looked at her. His entire body tightened. Christ, she was fantasy come to life on his bed, sitting back against the headboard, her wrists tied to the posts. She was all soft curves, her skirt riding up her sweet thighs, teasing him with forbidden glimpses, a snug sweater hugging full, round breasts, hair tousled about her face, her eyes wide and stormy. He had no doubt that she was a maiden. Her response to his brief kiss had told him that much. He'd never had a lass like her in his bed. Not even in his own century, where proper lasses had given the Keltar brothers wide berth. Rumors about "those pagan sorcerers" had been abundant in the Highlands. Though experienced women, married women, and maids had eagerly sought their beds, even they'd eschewed more permanent ties.

They're drawn to danger, but of no mind to live with it, Drustan had once said with a bitter smile. *They like to stroke the beast's silky pelt, feel his power and wildness, but make no mistake, brother—they'll never, never trust the beast around children.*

Well,'twas too late. She was with the beast whether she liked it or not.

If only she'd stayed on the street, she'd have been safe from him. He'd have left her alone.

He'd have done the honorable thing and erased her from his mind. And if by chance he'd encountered her again, he'd have turned coldly about and walked the other way.

But'twas too late for honor. She hadn't stayed on the street like a good lass. She was here in his bed. And he was a man, and not an honorable one at that.

And when you leave her? the tatters of his honor hissed.

I'll leave her so weel pleased she'll no' rue it. Some other bumbling fool would hurt her. I'll awaken her in ways she'll never forget. I'll give her fantasies that will heat her dreams for the rest of her life.

And that was the end of that argument, so far as he was concerned. He needed. The darkness in him grew wild without a woman. He no longer had the option of entertaining Katie, or any other women, in his home. But seduction, not conquest, was the main course on the table this eve. He would give her this night, mayhap the morrow, but anon, 'twould be conquest.

"So, um, are you going to untie me?"

With effort, he pried his gaze from her twisted skirt. She'd clamped her knees together anyway. *Wise lass*, he thought darkly, *but'twill do you no good in the end.*

"You can't just keep me," she said frostily.

"But I can."

"People will be looking for me."

"But no' here. None will press me, you know that."

When he eased himself down on the bed facing her, she plastered herself back against the headboard.

"You'll come to no harm at my hands, lass. I give you my word."

She opened her mouth, then dosed it, as if she'd thought better of it. Then she seemed to change her mind, shrugged, and said, "How can I believe that? I'm sitting in the middle of all this stolen stuff and you've tied me up. I can't help but worry about how you plan to deal with me. So, how do you?" When he didn't respond immediately, she added heatedly. "If you're going to kill me, I'm warning you right now—I'll haunt you till the end of your thieving days. I'll make your life a living hell. I'll make your legendary banshee seem demure and soft-spoken by comparison. You... you... you barbarian Visigoth," she spat.

"Och, and there's your Scots blood, lass," he said with a faint smile. "A fine bit o'

temper too. Though Visigoth is a bit far-fetched, I'm hardly doing anything so epic as the sacking of Rome."

She scowled. "Lots of books were lost then too."

"I treat them with care. And you needn't fash yourself, lass. I will no' harm you. Naught will be done to you that you doona wish done. I may borrow a few tomes, but that's the extent of my crimes. I'll be leaving soon. When I do, I'll release you."

Chloe searched his face intently, thinking she didn't quite like that part about "naught will be done to you that you doona wish done." Just what did he mean by that? Still, his gaze was level. She couldn't imagine why he would bother lying. "I could almost believe you mean that," she finally said.

"I do, lass."

"Hmph," she said noncommittally. A pause, then, "So, why do you do it?" she asked, nodding her head in the direction of the stolen texts.

"Does it matter?"

"Well, it shouldn't, but it sort of does. You see, I know those collections you stole from. There were far more valuable relics in them."

"I seek certain information. I merely borrowed them. They will be returned when I leave."

"And the moon is made of cheese," she said dryly.

"They will, though you doona believe me."

"And all the other things you've stolen?"

"What other things?"

"All that Celtic stuff. The knives and swords and badges and coins and—"

"All of that is mine by right of birth."

She gave him a skeptical look.

" 'Tis."

Chloe snorted.

" 'Tis Keltar regalia. I am a Keltar."

Her gaze turned measuring. "Are you saying the only things you've actually stolen are the texts?"

"Borrowed. And aye."

"I don't know what to make of you," she said, shaking her head.

"What does your viscera"—nay, that wasn't quite the right word—"instinct tell you?"

She looked at him intently, so intently that it was intimate. He wondered if a lass had ever looked at him so piercingly before. As if trying to probe the depths of his soul, down to the blackest heart of it. How would she judge him, this innocent? Would she damn him as he'd damned himself?

After a few moments, she shrugged and the moment was lost.

"What kind of information are you looking for?"

" 'Tis a long story, lass," he evaded, with a mocking smile.

"If you let me go, I really won't tell anyone. I far prefer to stay alive than get all hung up on moral compunctions. That's always been a no-brainer for me."

"No-brainer," he repeated slowly. "Simple decision?"

Chloe blinked. "Yes." She peered at him. Between some of the words he used and the way he occasionally paused, as if mulling over a word or phrase, it occurred to her that perhaps English wasn't his native tongue. He'd understood French. Curious, testing him, she asked him—in Latin—if Gaelic was his first language.

He answered in Greek that it was.

Sheesh, the thief was not only gorgeous, he was multilingual! She was starting to feel treacherously like Rene Russo again. "You're actually *reading* these things,

aren't you?" she said wonderingly. "Why?"

"I told you, lass, I'm looking for something."

"Well, if you tell me what, maybe I can help." The minute the words left her mouth, she was appalled. "I didn't mean that," she retracted the offer hastily. "I did *not* just offer to aid and abet a criminal."

"Curious lass, aren't you? I suspect it oft gets the best of you." He gestured toward the food. "'Tis cooling. What would you like?"

"Anything you eat first," she said instantly.

A look of incredulity crossed his face. "Think you I would poison you?" he said indignantly.

When *he* said it, it sounded like a patently ridiculous and perfectly paranoid thought. "Well," she said defensively, "how am I supposed to know?"

He gave her a chiding glance. Then, holding her gaze, he took a full bite from each plate.

"It might only kill in large doses," she countered.

Raising a brow, he took two more bites from each dish.

"My hands are tied. I can't eat."

He smiled then, a slow, sexy, shiver-inducing smile. "Och, but you can, lass," he purred, spearing a tender slice of salmon and raising it to her lips.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said flatly, clamping her lips shut. Oh, no, he wasn't going to harm her, he was just going to torture her, tease her, pretend he was being seductive, and watch Chloe Zanders turn into a stammering idiot while being hand-fed by the most incredibly gorgeous man this side of the Atlantic. No way. She wasn't going there.

"Open," he coaxed.

"I'm not hungry," she said mulishly.

"You are too."

"Am not."

"You will be on the morrow," he said, a faint smile playing about his sensual lips.

Chloe narrowed her eyes at him. "Why are you doing this?"

"There was a time, long ago in Scotland, when a man would select the finest from his trencher and feed his woman." His glittering golden gaze locked with hers. "Only after he'd sated her desires—fully and completely—did he sate his own."

Whuh. That comment went straight to her tummy, filling it with butterflies. Went straight to a few other parts, too, parts it was wiser not to think about. Not only was he a womanizer, he was smooth as silk. Stiffly, she gritted,

"We aren't in long-ago Scotland, I'm *not* your woman, and I'll *bet* she wasn't tied up."

He smiled at that and she noticed what had been bothering her about his smile then: Though he'd smiled several times, his amusement never seemed to reach his eyes. As if the man never quite dropped his guard. Never relaxed fully. Kept some part of himself locked away. Thief, kidnapper and seducer of women: What other secrets did he hide behind those cool eyes?

"Why do you fight me? Think you I might slay you with my fork?" he said lightly.

"I—"

Salmon in her mouth. Tricky thief. And it was good. Cooked to perfection. She swallowed hastily. "That wasn't fair."

"But was it good?"

She glared at him in stalwart silence.

"Life isn't always fair, lass, but that doesn't mean it can't still be sweet."

Disconcerted by his intense regard, Chloe decided it would be wiser to simply capitulate. God only knew what he might do if she didn't, and besides, she was

hungry. She suspected she could argue with him until she was blue in the face and get nowhere. The man was going to feed her and that was that.

And frankly, when he was sitting there on the bed, all sinfully gorgeous and playful and pretending to be flirtatious... it was a little hard to resist, even though she knew it was just some kind of game to him. When she was seventy years old (assuming she survived unscathed), sitting in her rocking chair with great-grandkids trundling about, she could reflect upon the memory of the strange night the irresistible Gaulish Ghost had fed her bits of Scots dishes and sips of fine wine in his penthouse in Manhattan.

The brush of danger in the air, the incredible sensuality of the man, the bizarreness of her situation were all combining to make her feel a little reckless.

She'd not known she had it in her.

She was feeling... well... rather intrepid.

Hours later, Chloe lay in the dark, watching the fire sputter and spark, her mind racing over the events of the day, reaching no satisfying conclusions.

It had been, by far, the strangest day of her life.

Had someone told her that morning, when she'd tugged on her panty hose and suit, how this ordinary, chilly, drizzly Wednesday in March would unfold, she'd have laughed it off as pure nonsense.

Had someone told her she would finish the day tied to a sumptuous bed in a luxurious corner penthouse in custody of the Gaulish Ghost, watching a fire burn down to embers, well fed and sleepy, she'd have escorted that person to the nearest psychiatric ward.

She was frightened—oh, who was she kidding? Embarrassed though she was to admit it, she was every bit as fascinated as she was frightened.

Life had taken a decidedly loopy turn and she wasn't as upset about it as she suspected she probably should be. It was a little difficult to work oneself into a satisfying fit of fear-for-one's-life, when one's captor was such an intriguing, seductive man. A man who cooked a full Scots meal for his prisoner, built a fire for her, and played classical music. An intelligent, well-educated man.

A sinfully sexy man.

When not only hadn't one been harmed, one had been quite tantalizingly kissed.

And although she had no idea what tomorrow would bring, she was curious to find out. What could he be looking for? Was it possible he was no more than what he presented himself as? A wealthy man who needed certain information for some reason, who—if he couldn't obtain the texts he needed by legitimate means—stole them, intending to return them?

"Right. Color *me* stupid." Chloe rolled her eyes.

Still, throwing a wrench into the works, impairing her ability to neatly label him a thief, was the fact that he'd donated valuable, authenticated artifacts in exchange for the third Book of Manannan.

Why would the Gaulish Ghost do such a thing? The facts just weren't adding up to the profile of a coldblooded mercenary. She was bursting with curiosity. She'd long suspected it might one day be her downfall and, indeed, it had landed her in quite a pickle.

After dinner, he'd untied her and escorted her to the bathroom adjoining the master suite (walking a bit too close for her comfort, making her painfully aware of two hundred-plus pounds of solid male muscle behind her). A few minutes and a knock later, he'd informed her he'd placed a shirt and sweats (he'd called them trews) outside the door.

She'd spent thirty minutes in the locked bathroom, first snooping for a convenient person-sized heating duct—the kind one frequently saw in the movies but never found in real life—then deliberating over whether writing an SOS message in lipstick on the window might accomplish anything. Other than him finding it and getting aggravated. She'd opted not. Not just yet anyway. No need to alert him to her intention to escape at the earliest opportunity.

She'd not felt brave enough to risk nudity and showering, even with the locked door, so she'd washed up a bit, then brushed her teeth with his toothbrush because there was no way she was *not* going to brush her teeth. She'd felt strange using it. She'd never used a man's toothbrush before. But after all, she'd rationalized, they'd eaten from the same fork. And she'd nearly had his tongue in

her mouth. Honestly would have rather *liked* his tongue in her mouth, so long as she had a firm guarantee it would stop there. (She wasn't *about* to become the next pair of panties beneath his bed, not that she had any to leave.)

She drowned in his clothes, but at least when he'd retied her to the bed, she hadn't had to worry about her skirt riding up. The sweats were drawstring—the only saving grace—rolled up about ten times, the shirt fell to her knees. No panties was a bit disconcerting.

He'd tucked her beneath the coverlet. Tested the bonds. Lengthened them slightly so she might sleep more comfortably.

Then he'd stood at the edge of the bed a moment, gazing down at her with an unfathomable expression in his exotic golden eyes. Unnerved, she'd broken eye contact first and rolled—inasmuch as she was able—onto her side away from him.

Sheesh, she thought, blinking heavy-lidded, sleepy eyes. She smelled like him. It was all over her.

She was falling asleep. She couldn't believe it. In the midst of such dreadful, stressful circumstances, she was falling asleep.

Well, she told herself, she needed her sleep so her wits would be sharp tomorrow. Tomorrow she would escape.

He hadn't tried to kiss her again, was her final, slightly wistful, and utterly ridiculous thought before she drifted off.

Several hours later, too restless to sleep, Dageus was in the living room, listening to the rain pattering against the windows and poring over the Midhe Codex, a collection of mostly nonsensical myths and vague prophecies ("a massive muddling mess of medieval miscellany," one renowned scholar had called it, and Dageus was inclined to agree), when the phone rang. He glanced at it warily, but did not rise to answer it.

A long pause, a beep, then "Dageus,'tis Drustan."

Silence.

"You know how I hate talking to machines. Dageus."

Long silence, a heavy sigh.

Dageus fisted his hands, unfisted them, then massaged his temples with the heels of his palms.

"Gwen's in the hospital—"

Dageus's head whipped toward the answering machine, he half-rose, but stopped.

"She had untimely contractions."

Worry in his twin brother's voice. It knifed straight to Dageus's heart. Gwen was six-and-a-half-months pregnant with twins. He held his breath, listening. He'd not sacrificed so much to bring his brother and his brother's wife together in the twenty-first century, only to have something happen to Gwen now.

"But she's fine now."

Dageus breathed again and sank back down to the sofa.

"The doctors said sometimes it happens in the last trimester, and so long as she doesn't have further contractions, they'll consider releasing her on the morrow."

A time filled with naught but the faint sound of his brother's breathing.

"Och... brother... come home." Pause. Softly, "Please."

Click.

Chapter 5

Dageus was perilously close to losing control.

"That means 'bridge,' not 'adjoining walkway,' " she was saying, peering over his shoulder and pointing at what he'd just scribbled in the notes he was taking. Some of her hair tumbled over his shoulder and spilled down his chest. It was all he could do not to slip his hand into it and tug her lips to his.

He should never have untied her this morn. But it wasn't as if she could escape him, and it bordered on barbaric to keep her tied to the bed. Besides, the mere thought of her tied to the bed was obsessing a dark part of his mind. Still, it was no better having her flitting about, examining everything, pestering him with incessant questions and comments.

Each time he looked at her, a silent growl rose in his throat, scarce repressed hunger, need to touch her and taste her and—

"Doona be hanging over my shoulder, lass." Her scent was filling his nostrils, inciting a lustful stupor. Scent of lush woman and innocence. Christ, didn't she sense that he was dangerous? Mayhap not overtly, but in the way a mouse took one look at a cat and kept wisely to the shadowy corners of a room? Apparently not, for she chattered on.

"I'm just curious," she said peevishly. "And you're getting it wrong. That says, 'When the man from the mounts, high where the yellow eagles soar, takes the low... er, path or journey... on the bridge that cheats death'—how curious, the bridge that cheats death?—'the Draghar will return' Who are the Draghar? I've never heard of them. What is that? The Midhe Codex? I've never heard of that either. May I see it? Where did you get it?"

Dageus shook his head. She was irrepressible. "Sit lass, or I'll tie you up again."

She glared at him. "I'm only trying to be helpful—"

"And why is that? I'm a thief, remember? A barbarian Visigoth, as you put it."

She scowled. "You're right. I don't know what got into me." A long pause. Then, "It's just that I thought if you really *were* going to return them"—she gave him a

searingly skeptical look—"the sooner you finished with them, the sooner they'd go back. So I'd be helping for a good cause." She nodded pertly, looking inordinately pleased with her rationalization.

He snorted and motioned her to sit down. 'Twas evident the lass was obsessed with antiquities and curious as the day was long. Her fingers actually curled absently whenever she looked at the Codex, as if she was aching to touch it.

He'd like to see her aching to touch him like that. Worldly women all but pushed him into bed. He'd never seduced an innocent before. He sensed she would resist... The thought both amused and aroused him.

Huffily, she plunked down on the sofa opposite him, folded her arms and stared at him across piles of texts and notebooks on the marble coffee table between them. Lush lips pursed, one foot tapping.

One wee, bare delicate foot, with shell-pink toenails. Slender ankles peeking from his rolled-up sweats. Clad in one of his linen shirts, the sleeves pushed up to the elbows, which was also where the shoulders dropped to on her delicate frame, her hair mussed about her face, she was a vision. The fickle March sun had decided to shine for the moment, like as not, he thought, just so it could spill in the wall of windows behind her, and kiss her curly coppery-blond tresses.

Tresses he'd like to feel spilling over his thighs. While those lush pink lips...

"Eat your breakfast," he growled, turning back to the text.

She narrowed her eyes. "I already did. I'm going to lose my job, you know."

"What?"

"My job. I'm going to get fired *if* I don't show up for work. And then how will I live? I mean, assuming you really mean it about letting me go."

She gave him another haughty glare, then glanced toward the door for the dozenth time, and he knew she was wondering if she could make it to it before he stopped her. He wasn't worried. Even if she made it out the door, she'd never make it onto the elevator in time. He knew also that earlier, she'd stood behind him, her gaze drifting betwixt a heavy lamp and the back of his skull. She hadn't tried to bash him with it, wise lass.

Mayhap she'd seen his tense readiness, mayhap she'd decided his skull was too thick.

He inhaled deeply and released it slowly. If he didn't get her out of the room soon, he was going to leap the table betwixt them, pin her to the sofa, and have his way with her. And though he fully intended to, he needed to finish the Midhe Codex first. Discipline was a crucial part of controlling the evil within him. The first portion of the day was for work, the evening for seduction, the wee hours for more work. He'd been living that way for many moons. 'Twas imperative he keep things neatly compartmentalized, for he could too easily become a man consumed by indulging whatever momentary need or whim struck him. Only by rigidly maintaining his routines, never deviating, did he prove to himself that he was indeed in control.

The Draghar, he brooded. This was the third mention of them he'd encountered. The peculiar phrasing did seem to encompass his actions. The man from the mounts... the bridge that cheats death. But who or what were the Draghar? Were they mayhap some faction of the legendary Tuatha Dé Danaan? Would they return from their mythic hidden places to hunt him now that he'd broken his oath and violated The Compact?

The deeper he dug into tomes that neither he nor Drustan had previously spared a thought for, the more he realized that his clan had forgotten, even abandoned, much of their ancient history. The Keltar library was vast, and in his thirty-three years he'd scarce made a dent in it. There were texts no Keltar had bothered with for centuries, mayhap millennia. There was too much lore for a man to absorb in a single lifetime, and verily, there'd been no need to. Over the aeons, they'd grown careless and content, looking forward not behind. He supposed it was man's way to relinquish the past, to live in the now, unless suddenly the ancient past became critical.

Had they not forgotten so much, he might never have stood in the circle of stones, assuring himself there was no evil in the in-between awaiting him should he use the stones for personal motive. He might never have half-convinced himself that the Tuatha Dé Danaan, a vague race spoken of in vaguer terms, were but a myth, a faetale woven to prevent a Keltar from misusing his power. Not that he'd believed he had been abusing it. He'd not thought of his actions as serving personal motives. Well, not entirely, for was love not the greatest and

most noble purpose of all?

She was *havering* away again.

How best to make her give him some peace?

A predatory smile curved his lips.

He looked up. Raised his eyes from the text and looked at her, deliberately letting all that he was thinking about doing to her—which was everything—show on his face, blaze in his gaze.

She sucked in a soft breath.

Head canted down, he looked at her from beneath his brows. It was the kind of look one warrior might give to another in challenge, or the kind of look a man gave a woman he intended to thoroughly plunder. Slowly, with lazy sensuality, he wet his lower lip. Dropped his gaze from hers, to her lips and back again.

Her eyes grew impossibly round and she swallowed.

He caught his full lower lip with his teeth and slowly released it, then smiled. It was not a smile meant to reassure. It was a smile that promised dark fantasies. Whether she wanted them or not.

"I'll just be in the study," she said faintly, hopping briskly from the sofa and practically running from the room.

Only after she'd left did he make that noise. A long, low growl of anticipation.

Chloe's heart was hammering furiously and she wasn't seeing a darned thing as she pretended to peer at the titles of the books on the shelves in his study.

Heavens, that look! Holy cow!

There he'd sat across from her, looking breathtakingly gorgeous in black from head to toe, his gorgeous midnight hair pulled back from his gorgeous face, essentially ignoring her, then he'd raised his eyes—but not his head—from the text and given her a look of... quintessential sexual heat.

No man had ever looked at Chloe Zanders like that. Like she was some kind of

succulent dessert and he was coming off a week-long fast of bread and water.

And his lip—God, when he caught and released that sinfully full lower with his teeth, it made a girl just want to snack on it. For hours.

I do believe the man might be planning to seduce me, she thought wonderingly. Yes, she knew he was a womanizer, and yes, last night he'd seemed flirtatious, but she hadn't taken it seriously. She wasn't exactly the kind of woman that men like him fell all over themselves trying to get to. Chloe was pretty realistic about her looks; she wasn't tall, leggy, model material, that was for sure. Even the Security guys had said she wasn't his type.

But that look...

"He only did it to get you to leave, Zanders," she muttered to herself. "And it worked. You willy-nilly chicken, you."

She was on the verge of stomping back out there and calling his bluff; indeed, had moved back toward the door and was about to step out, when he made a sound.

A sound that made her shiver and close the door instead.

And lock it.

A hungry animal sound.

Leaning back against the door, Chloe took slow, deep breaths.

She was in way over her head. It was one thing to be held hostage by a criminal. To maybe fantasize about kisses. It was entirely another thing to be seduced by him. The dastardly man was both a thief and a kidnapper, and she dare not forget that.

She had to escape before it was too late. Before she was fabricating reasons, not merely to aid and abet the criminal, but to present him with her virginity on a silver platter.

When Chloe crept from the study half an hour later, the arrogant man actually let her get all the way to the door before he bothered moving. Then he stood slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, and gave her a look of gentle reproof and

disappointment.

As if she was doing something wrong.

Defiantly, Chloe brandished the short sword she'd pilfered from his wall collection, having decided it was best for her size, eighteen inches of razor-sharp steel. "I told you I won't tell anyone and I won't. But I can't stay here."

"Put down the blade, lass."

Chloe twisted the interior dead bolt.

The precise moment she tugged at the door, he lunged, and when it didn't open she was stunned, then realized that it hadn't been locked to begin with.

Frantically, she scrabbled to turn it the other way, but his palm hit the door above her head and he crowded her with his body. Instinctively, she raised the sword and he stiffened, as the tip of it came to rest at his heart.

They stared at each other a long moment. Dimly, she realized his breath was coming as shallowly as hers.

"Do it, lass," he said coolly.

"What?"

"Kill me. I'm a thief. The evidence is here. You'll need but summon your police and show them that I am—or was—the Gaulish Ghost, that I held you captive. None will blame you for killing me to escape. 'Tis no more than any honest lass would do."

She gaped. Kill him? She didn't like hearing him speak about himself in the past tense. It put a cold, awful knot in her stomach.

"Do it," he insisted.

"I don't want to *kill* you. I just want to *leave*."

"Because I've treated you so badly?"

"Because you're holding me captive!"

"And it's been awful, has it no'?" he mocked lightly.

"Just step back," she hissed. When he deliberately pressed his body forward against the tip of the sword and she felt his skin give beneath the blade, she gasped. His lips curved in a chilling smile.

And she knew if she drew the blade back, it would gleam red with his blood. The awful knot was joined by nausea.

"Kill me or put down the sword," he said with deadly intensity. "Those are your options. Your only options."

Chloe searched his eyes, those glittering golden eyes. They seemed to be swirling with shadows, changing color, dimming from molten amber to burnt copper, but that wasn't possible. The moment was taut with danger, and she had the sudden bizarre feeling that something... *else*... was in the penthouse with them. Something ancient and very, very cold.

Or was it just the coldness in those eyes? She shook herself, scattering her absurd thoughts.

He was serious. He would make her kill him to leave.

She couldn't do it.

It wasn't even remotely possible. She didn't want Dageus MacKeltar dead. She didn't *ever* want him dead. Even if it meant he was out there, a rogue thief, beautiful as a fallen angel, breaking laws and stealing artifacts.

When she let the sword dip, his hand moved in a lightning-fast blur of motion. She screamed, dropping the sword as the silver flash of a blade arced up toward her face.

It sank into the door beside her ear.

"Look at it, lass," he ordered.

"Wh-what?"

"The dirk. 'Tis a fourteenth-century *skean dhu*."

She turned her head gingerly and peered at the blade protruding from the door, then glanced back at him. She was walled in by six feet plus of muscle and man,

palms on either side of her head. A knife by her ear. He'd had it somewhere on his body all along. Could have used it on her at any moment. But hadn't.

"You like your artifacts, doona you, lass?"

She nodded.

"Take it."

Chloe blinked.

He dropped his hands suddenly and stepped back. "Go on, take it."

Eyeing him warily, Chloe tugged the blade from the door with a little grunt. It required both her hands to free it. "Oh," she breathed. Hilt studded with emeralds and rubies, it was exquisite. The finest blade she'd ever seen. "This must be worth a fortune! It's in mint condition. There's not even the teeniest nick on the blade! Tom would give anything for this."

So, she was afraid, might she.

" 'Tis my own. 'Tis the crest of the Keltar on the hilt. Now'tis yours. For when you leave. Should you lose your job."

He turned around and stalked back to the sofa.

When he sat down and resumed working on the text, Chloe stood in stunned silence, her gaze drifting from him to the *skean dhu* and back again. Several times she opened her mouth to speak, then closed it.

His actions had just demonstrated, more persuasively than any words he might have used, that he'd meant it when he'd said he wouldn't hurt her. What words had he used last night? *Naught will be done to you that you doona wish done.*

She didn't find that quite as comforting as she might have, had her own wishes been a bit purer.

He'd just put an ancient Celtic artifact in her hands and called it hers.

Her fingers curled possessively around the hilt of the dagger. She should object strenuously. Or at least, protest politely. And she was going to, anytime now.

She waited. Anytime now.

Sighing dismally, she acknowledged that some things just weren't humanly possible—not even Martha Stewart could fold fitted sheets.

Oh, Grandda, why didn't you ever tell me Scotsmen were so fascinating? He knows just how to get to me.

She almost thought she heard Evan MacGregor's soft laughter. As if he'd answered her from somewhere beyond the stars, *You wouldn't be satisfied with less, Chloe. You've got your share of wild blood in you too.*

Did she? Was that why, lately, she'd been waking up in the middle of the night, full of energy that desperately needed an outlet? Why, despite how well her job was going (she knew she was going to be promoted soon), she'd been growing increasingly restless? For months now, a small but insistent voice inside her had been murmuring, "Is this all there is of my life?"

The Gaulish Ghost was offering her a bribe, a payoff of sorts. Be a "good lass" and leave with a prize. Her very own Celtic artifact.

In exchange for her silence and cooperation.

Chloe was having an ethical crisis.

Fortunately, it was brief.

She stooped to pick up the forgotten sword and return it to the study. "I could use some clothes that *fit*," she grumbled as she passed behind him.

Had his back not been to her, had she seen the smile that curved his lips, she would have shivered from head to toe.

"Dageus, darling, I miss you, I need you. I'm *dying* without you." Pause. "Call me. It's Katherine."

The answering machine clicked off".

A moment later Dageus appeared. Their gazes collided as he turned down the volume on the answering machine.

"Dageus, darling," Chloe cooed, feeling inexplicably irritable. There she'd been, paging delicately through the Midhe Codex and feeling strangely content while he rattled about domestically in the kitchen, cooking for her, when Katherine had interrupted.

He flashed her an entirely-too-devastating smile and shrugged. "I'm a man, lass." Then went back to the kitchen.

Leaving Chloe to mutter beneath her breath. Just why she cared she had no idea. But it irritated her.

"Were you born in Scotland?" Chloe asked later, pushing her plate back with a sigh. Another fabulous dinner: Aberdeen Angus steak with mushrooms in wine sauce, young red potatoes with chives, salad and crusty bread spread with honey-butter. And wine, though he was sipping Macallan, fine single-malt scotch.

"Aye. The Highlands. Near Inverness. And you?"

"Indianapolis. But my parents died when I was four, so I went to live in Kansas with my grandda."

"That must have been difficult."

It had been horrible. They'd refused to let her see her parents' bodies, which, though now she understood, at the time she hadn't. She'd thought someone had stolen them and wouldn't give them back. Hadn't believed they could just not *be* anymore. But eventually she'd healed. She knew it had shaped her in ways people with parents would never understand, but she'd been lucky. She'd had someone who'd rescued her, and Chloe believed one should always count one's blessings.

"Where's the Scots blood in you, lass?"

"My grandda. Evan MacGregor. Do you have family?"

A dark shadow flitted through his eyes, a brief flash of anguish, there and gone so quickly that she wasn't certain she hadn't imagined it.

"My mother and da are dead. I have a brother." He rose abruptly, gathering plates and taking them to the kitchen, leaving her to puzzle over what she thought she'd

glimpsed. She was determined to pursue it, but when he returned, he distracted her by placing a glass of sparkling blood-red liquor in one hand and a cigar in the other.

Chloe blinked. "What is this?"

"The finest cigar money can buy and a glass of equally fine port."

"And just what do you think I'm going to do with it?"

"Enjoy." He flashed her a charming smile.

Chloe peered at the cigar curiously, rolling it in her fingers. She'd never smoked. Not anything. Had never wanted to. But if ever a moment was ripe to try new things, it was here and now, with a man who certainly wouldn't sit in judgment upon her, no matter what she might do. It was strangely freeing, she realized, being around a man like him.

"Doona fash yourself, you needn't inhale. 'Tis but the subtle combination of the port and pungent smoke on your tongue. Give it a try. If you doona like it, at least you'll know the next time someone offers you one."

He showed her how, preparing the cigar, coaxing her to puff it alight.

"I feel like I'm doing something bad." She sneezed.

Och, she had no idea how bad. A small thing, to get her to smoke a cigar and have port. Lasses loved to flirt with danger, with things they'd never tried before, no matter how good they were. Oft *because* of how good they were. And one wee taste of the forbidden, oft translated into hunger for other fruit. *Hunger, Chloe-lass*, he willed silently. *I'll sate any desire you have*. He could nearly taste her innocence on his tongue. Indeed, would, very soon.

"You've been doing something bad since the moment you met me, lass," he purred, meaning himself, but when she glanced askance, he provoked, "snooping about in my bedroom—"

"I only snooped in your bedroom because you had stolen artifacts in there—"

"And why were you in my bedroom in the first place?" he asked silkily.

She flushed. "Because I was, er... I got, er..." she sputtered.

"And I must confess, I've been wondering just what you were doing near enough my bed to find those books. You must have been all but in it. Were you curious about me? About my bed? Mayhap about me in it?"

Her blush deepened. "I was just snooping, okay? But if I'd had any idea what I was going to find, I wouldn't have."

He smiled, a slow seductive smile, and Chloe caught her breath.

"Take a sip of port and let it lie upon your tongue a moment."

Chloe sipped.

"Now the cigar."

She puffed lightly. Sweet and smoky, a fascinating combination. Another sip, another puff. She laughed. She felt silly puffing on the fat cigar. She felt warm and alive. She turned her head to tell him what she thought, but he'd dropped beside her on the sofa and she ran into his lips.

Smack into that decadent, full, sinful mouth, and the minute they made contact, Chloe *sizzled*. Heat lanced through her from head to toe; a kind of wild heat she'd never felt before. A heat that she instinctively understood could burn her beyond recognition. He'd not smoked his cigar, and he tasted of malt, then his hot tongue slipped inside her mouth and her entire world upended. She scarcely noticed when he deftly slid the cigar and glass from her hands, depositing them elsewhere. He might have dropped them on the floor for all she cared.

"Chloe-lass. I need to taste you. Open more. Give me."

He buried his hands in her hair, kissing her, and suddenly it was utterly insignificant that he stole artifacts, that he'd taken her captive, that he lived outside the law. She cared only that his tongue was in her mouth, and how it made her feel. The world ceased to exist beyond that.

Slow, deep kisses, erotic nips with his teeth, his mouth gliding, slipping and sliding over hers. He caught her lower lip and tugged lazily away, returned to catch it again, then slanted his mouth firmly over hers, plundering. He nibbled,

he sucked, he consumed. The man didn't simply kiss, he made love to a woman's mouth, made it feel all hot and swollen and achy. Made her make funny noises and feel shaky all over. Made her feel like she might—

I'm dying without you. Call me. It's Katherine.

—totally lose herself and fall for him like countless women undoubtedly had. A woman he'd not called back. And unlike what she'd heard in the sophisticated purr of Katherine's voice, Chloe didn't possess the proper world-liness, the necessary defenses. If she were foolish enough to let him, the man would use her and discard her. And there'd be no one to blame but herself. It wasn't as if she didn't know, going in, what kind of man he was. Definitely the love-'em-and-leave-'em type. And how would she feel, knowing she'd been just another hit-and-run? Used, that was how.

"S-stop," she breathed.

He didn't. His hands dropped from her hair to her breasts, moving possessively over them, cupping and plumping. His thumbs glided over her nipples, and they peaked instantly. She felt like she was drowning. The man was too overwhelmingly male and sexual, and Chloe knew that she had to stop him, because in a few more moments, she wouldn't be able to remember why she should.

"Please," she cried. "Stop!"

He held her lower lip hostage for a long, erotic moment, then, with a ragged growl, he broke the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers, his breathing shallow and fast. When had it gotten so cold in the room? she wondered dimly. There must be a window open somewhere, letting in an *icy* breeze. She shivered. Her skin was hot, flushed from his passion, yet the fine hair all over her body had puckered into goose bumps.

"I won't hurt you," he said, his voice low and urgent.

Maybe not physically, she thought, *but there are other kinds of pain*. In twenty-four hours she'd become hopelessly infatuated with a thief. Mesmerized by a stranger who dripped "forbidden" and "secrets" and "criminal." She shook her head, straining to pull away from him. Accepting a bribe was one thing, losing

herself was another. And she had no doubt that she could get lost in such a man. They simply weren't in the same league.

His hands went back up to her hair and he clutched tightly, his head down, and for a moment she thought he would refuse to let her go. Then he raised his head and looked at her, his gaze dark and intense.

"I want you, lass."

"You hardly even know me," she retorted shakily. She suspected that when Dageus MacKeltar told a woman he wanted her in such a voice, he didn't hear "no" often, if ever.

"I wanted you the moment I saw you on the street."

"On the street?" He'd seen her on the street? When? Where? The thought that he'd noticed her before they'd met in his bedroom made her feel breathless.

"You were arriving when I was leaving. I was in the cab behind you. I saw you and I—" he broke off abruptly.

"What?"

He smiled bitterly and traced the pad of his thumb over her lower lip, still swollen and damp from his kisses. "And I told myself a lass like you was no' for me."

"Why?"

The desire in his eyes ebbed, replaced by such a remote, empty expression that she felt it like a slap. He'd shut her out. Completely. She could feel it, and didn't like it one bit. Felt bereft.

He stood abruptly. "Come, lass, let's put you to bed." He smiled mockingly, another one of those that didn't reach his cool eyes. "Alone, if you insist."

"But why? Why would you think that?" It was terribly important to her to hear his answer.

He didn't answer her, Merely escorted her to the bathroom, offered her towels for a shower if she wished—which she was definitely too uncomfortable to do and

refused, but washed up and brushed her teeth again—then motioned her toward the bed so he could tie her.

"*Must* you do this?" she protested as he knotted the first scarf.

"No' if I'm sleeping with you," was his cool reply.

She thrust her wrist at him.

"I know you're untouched, if'tis what fashes you."

"And we both know *you're* not," she muttered irritably. *Mr. Multipk-Magnums-beneath-the-bed. How did he know she was a virgin? Was it stamped on her forehead? Were her kisses so inept?*

" 'Twas naught but practice for the day I might please you."

She shivered. Smooth, very smooth. "If you don't tie me, I promise I won't try to escape."

"Aye, you would."

"I give you my word."

With a graceful flick of his hand, he tossed one of the pillows from the bed.

Chloe didn't have to glance down to know what he'd just revealed: the *skean dhu* she'd wrapped earlier in a soft piece of plaid she'd found, then tucked beneath the pillow so she might cut herself free later. "I was keeping it safe. I didn't know where else to put it." She batted her lashes.

"No words of promise or even desire binds a woman. Bonds bind a woman." He scooped up both blade and plaid, crossed the room, and tucked them in a drawer.

She narrowed her eyes. "Who taught you that? Women? Sounds to me like maybe you pick the wrong ones. What are your criteria? Do you *have* any criteria?"

He shot her a dark look. "Aye. That they'll have me."

Blinking, she let him tie her. The man could have any woman.

There was a very dangerous moment when he fastened her second wrist. A long pregnant pause where they simply stared at each other. She wanted him, ached for him, and the intensity of it terrified her. She hardly knew the man, and what she did know about him was anything but reassuring.

As he dosed the door he said over his shoulder, "Because you're a good lass." A heavy sigh. "And I'm no' a good man."

It took her a moment to understand what he was talking about. Then she realized he'd finally answered her question—why she was not for him.

Chapter 6

I'm no' a good man.

'Twas the only real warning she would ever get from him on her sweet, inevitable fall from grace.

Dageus sipped his whisky and stared at her. That kiss, that one mere sip of a kiss still lay upon his tongue, honey-sweet, and no amount of whisky could wash it off. He'd scarce begun to taste her when she'd stopped him.

And stopping had damn near killed him. His tongue in her mouth, his hands in her hair, for a brief moment he'd been filled with icy rage, pure and black, something that refused to be denied. The ancient ones had stirred, demanding he sate his hunger. *Force her*, a dark voice had purred. *You can make her like it.*

He'd waged a dread battle against them, hence the carefulness with which he'd pulled away. That blackness was not him. Would not be him. He would not permit it. It could too easily consume him.

He knew he shouldn't be in the bedchamber. He wasn't in the best temper for many reasons, not the least of them that he'd used magic earlier, first on a brief visit to Security before she'd wakened, reminding them that they saw Chloe Zanders leave yestreen, and later when she'd tried to escape, a reflexive action, without thought. The interior dead bolt had been locked for a change, and she'd unlocked it, and he'd jammed it with a whispered word before she could open it.

Then, pressed close to her, with blades betwixt them and a bit of blood on his skin and the darkness rising, he'd made clear the cost of her escape: his life.

Wagering she'd back down swiftly.

A perverse part of him daring her to end his dishonor at the end of his own sword.

Either way, he'd have more peace.

She'd accepted his blade and stayed. She didn't ken the full significance of that. When a Druid offered his favored weapon, his *Selvar*, the one he wore against

his skin, to a woman, he offered his protection. His guardianship. Forever.

And she'd taken it.

She was sleeping on her back, the only way she could, with her wrists restrained, though he'd left considerable play in the bonds. Her lovely breasts rose and fell with the gentle, slow breaths of deep slumber.

He should let her go.

And he knew he wasn't going to. He wanted Chloe Zanders in ways he'd never wanted a lass before. She made him feel like a sapling lad, wanting to impress her with masculine feats of prowess, protect her, sate her every desire, to be the focus of her shiny bright heart, so full of innocence. As if she might somehow wash him clean again.

She was curiosity and wonder; he was cynicism and despair. She was bursting with dreams; he was carved out and hollow inside. Her heart was young and true; his was iced with disillusion, scarce beating enough to keep him alive.

She was all he'd dreamed of once, long ago. The kind of lass to whom he'd have given binding Druid vows, pledged his life to forever. Smart, the woman spoke four languages that he knew of. Tenacious, determined, logical in a circuitous way. Real, believing in things. Protective of the old ways, that was evident each time she watched him turn a page. Twice she'd handed him a tissue to do it with when he'd forgotten, lest he get the oil of his skin on the precious pages.

And he could sense in her a woman that wanted to break out. A woman who'd lived a quiet life, a respectable life, but hungered for more. He could sense, with the unerring instincts of a sexual predator, that Chloe was wanton at heart. That the man she chose to grant liberties to, would be granted them unconditionally. Sexually aggressive, dominant to the bone, he recognized in her his perfect bedmate.

He was a man who could offer no promises, no assurances. A man with a terrible darkness growing inside him.

And all he could think was...

...when he took her, he would strip the clothing from her body, baring every inch

of her to his immense hunger.

He would stretch himself atop her, forearms flush to the bed on either side of her head, pinning her long hair beneath his weight. He would kiss her...

He was kissing her and she was drowning in the heat and sensuality of the man. Her hands tied to the bedposts, her body naked, she was lying in his bed, on fire. His for the taking.

He didn't just kiss, he claimed ownership. Took her mouth with urgency, as if his life depended on his kissing her. Licked and nipped and tasted, sucking her lower lip, catching it with his teeth. His hands were on her breasts and her skin ached with need where he touched. He kissed her long and deep and slow, then kissed her hard and punishing and fast...

...like fine china, delicate china, then he would punish her with hard kisses for being so perfect, for being everything he didn't deserve. For the wonder she still had, the wonder she made him remember once feeling.

Being a man, he would have to know that she needed him. So he would kiss every inch of her silken skin, dragging his tongue over the peaks of her nipples. Rasping them with his unshaven jaw, till they budded hard and tight for him, teeth nipping, then he would move those kisses to the sweet feminine heat between her legs, where he would taste that taut aching bud. Slow long strokes of his tongue there.

Ever-so-delicate nips.

Then more strong strokes, faster and faster until she writhed beneath him.

But still, she wouldn't be wild enough for him.

So he would slip his finger inside her. Find that spot, one of several special ones, that drove a woman wild. Feel her tighten convulsively around him. Feel her hunger. Then withdraw and taste her with his tongue again. Lapping. Lapping. Drowning in the sweet taste of her.

Then two fingers. Then his tongue. Until she...

"Please!" Chloe cried, arching her back, arching up and up, begging for his

touch.

Dageus loomed above her, his hard body gilded by firelight, a sheen of sweat glistening on his skin.

"What do you want, Chloe?" His glittering gaze challenged

her, dared her to want, dared her to speak of those things she'd never said aloud. Secret fantasies she sheltered in her woman's heart. Fantasies she knew he'd be only too willing to fulfill; one and all.

"Please!" she cried, not knowing how to put it into words. "Everything!"

His nostrils flared and he inhaled, sharply, and she suddenly wondered if she'd said something far more dangerous than she knew.

"Everything?" he purred. "Everything I might want? Everything I might dream of doing to you? Do you mean to gift me your innocence—without condition?"

A heartbeat passed, then two.

...would say that she needed him. Was willing to relinquish everything. He would turn his years of mastery—all those years he'd made heated love with a cold heart to women who'd wanted nothing from him but his body—to Chloe's lush curves, the backs of her knees, the inside of her thighs, laving every inch with his tongue. He would untie her, roll her onto her stomach. Stretch her hands above her head, catch them in one of his, nipping the nape of her neck. He would drag his tongue down her spine, lavishing attention on his favorite spot, the slender, delicate arch where a woman's back met her bottom, then kiss every inch of her sweet ass.

Kneeling above her, straddling her, he would nudge her soft curves with his hard cock. Feel her buck up and back...

"Dageus!" Chloe cried. He was behind her, hot and silky and hard against her bottom, and she felt so damned empty inside that it hurt.

"What, lass?"

"Make love to me," she gasped.

"Why?" He stretched flat atop her, skin to skin from her head to her toes, his palms to the backs of her hands, pressing them against the bed, letting her feel the full weight of him, making it hard for her to breathe. He nudged her thighs apart with his knee. He thrust his hips, pushing against her, but not inside her. Deliberately teasing her.

"I want you."

"Want is no' enough. You must feel like you can't breathe wi'out me inside you. Do you need me? No matter the cost? Though I've warned you I'm no' a good man?"

"Yes! God, yes!"

"Say it."

"I need you!"

"Say my name."

"Dageus!"

Chloe snapped awake with a violent start, sweating and breathing hard, and so intensely aroused that she hurt from head to toe. "Wh-what..." she trailed off, remembering the dream. *Oh, God*, she thought, appalled. Shaking her head, she suddenly realized she wasn't alone.

He was in the room with her.

Sitting not two feet away from her in a chair beside the bed, watching her with those glittering tiger-eyes.

Their gazes collided.

And she had the most awful feeling that he somehow knew. Knew that she'd been dreaming of him. In his smoldering gaze was a strange satisfaction.

A hot flush suffused her from head to toe. She glanced frantically down. Thank God, she was still fully clothed. It had been but a dream.

He couldn't *possibly* know.

She tugged the covers up to her chin. The air in the room was positively frigid.

"You sounded restless," he purred, his voice dark as the shadowy room. "I came to check on you and thought I'd sit nearby till you calmed."

"I'm calm now," she lied blatantly. Her heart was hammering and she turned away so she wouldn't betray something with her eyes.

She sneaked a quick peek at him. Beautiful man. Sitting half-gilded by the dying firelight. One side of his face golden, the other in shadows. She was nearly panting. Bit her lip to quiet herself.

"Then I should go?"

"You should go."

"You doona... *need*... anything, Chloe-lass?"

"Just for you to let me go," she said stiffly.

Never, Dageus thought, pulling the door firmly closed.

When she'd wakened, he'd been stunned to realize that somehow his thoughts, the painfully intense seduction he'd been imagining, had crept into her dreams.

Power. There was power inside him and he dare not forget that. Somehow that power had made her share his fantasy.

A dangerous thing.

Apparently, he'd used magic yet again, without even realizing it.

A muscle leaped in his jaw. 'Twas getting damned hard to see where the ancient ones began and he ended.

He had work yet to do this eve, he reminded himself, shaking himself sharply, resisting the darkness that stretched and flexed within him. The darkness that tried to convince him he was a god, and aught he wished was his due.

Tugging on his boots and donning his coat, he cast a last glance in the direction of the bedchamber before he slipped from the penthouse. She was securely bound, would never know he was gone. It would be but for a few hours.

Before he left, he turned the thermostat up. It was cold in the penthouse.

Chapter 7

He had to use magic again, the *feth fiada*, the Druid spell that made the user difficult for the human eye to see, and by the time Dageus returned to the penthouse, he was too tightly strung to sleep. He'd not known such a spell existed before the dark ones had claimed him that fateful eve. Now their knowledge was *his* knowledge, and although he tried to pretend he was unaware of the full extent of the power within him, sometimes when he was doing something, he'd suddenly know a spell to make it easier, as if he'd known it all his life.

Some of the spells he now "simply knew" were horrific. The ancient ones within him had been judge, jury, and executioner on many occasions.

It was getting dangerous, he was growing more detached. Perched at the edge of the abyss, and the abyss was looking back, with feral, crimson eyes.

He needed. A woman's body, a woman's tender touch. A woman's desire to make him feel like a man not a beast.

He could go to Katherine; it wouldn't matter the hour. She would welcome him with open arms and he could lose himself in her, shove her ankles above her head, and drive himself into her until he felt human again.

He didn't want Katherine. He wanted the woman upstairs in his bed.

He could all too easily see himself taking the stairs three at a time, stripping as he went, stretching atop her helpless, tied form, teasing her until she was animal with need, until she begged him to take her. He knew he could make her give herself to him. Och, mayhap she'd not be willing at first, but he knew ways of touching that could drive a woman wild.

His breathing was ragged.

He was headed for the stairs, tugging his sweater over his head when he caught himself.

Deep breaths. Focus, Keltar.

If he went to her now, he would hurt her. He was too raw, too hungry. Gritting his teeth, he yanked his sweater back on and whirled about, stared sightlessly out the window for a time.

Two more times he caught himself heading up the stairs. Two more times he forced himself back down. He dropped to the floor and did push-ups until his body ran with sweat. Then crunches, and more push-ups. He recited bits of history, counted backward in Latin, then Greek, then in the more obscure, difficult languages.

Eventually, he regained control. Or as much control as he was going to get without sex.

She was going to shower today, he decided, suddenly chafed by her lack of faith in him, if he had to lock her in the bathroom all day.

As if he might break in on her when she was in the shower.

He'd just *proved* that he was in control. Verily, he was all about control where she was concerned. Had she any idea what he was battling, and how difficult it had been thus far—yet he'd prevailed—then she'd shower.

Ha. Then she'd, like as not, fling herself from my terrace forty-three floors up merely to escape me, he thought, getting up and propping one of the terrace doors slightly ajar.

He stared out over the quiet city—as quiet as Manhattan ever got, still humming, even at four in the morning. Fickle March weather, the clime had been fluctuating for days, rising and dropping as much as thirty degrees in a few hours. Now it was temperate again, but the light rain could well turn to snow by midmorn. Spring was trying to beat back winter and fading, rather mirroring his bleak internal landscape.

Blowing out a gusty breath, he sat down to immerse himself in the third Book of Manannan. This final tome, then he would go. Not on the morrow, but the next day. He'd done all he could here. He doubted what he wanted was in the tome anyway. There'd once been five Books of Manannan, but only three were extant. He'd already read the first two; they'd dealt with the legends of Ireland's gods before the arrival of the Tuatha Dé Danaan. This third volume continued the

tales of the gods, and their encounters with the first wave of settlers to invade Ireland. As slowly as the historical timeline was moving, Dageus suspected the arrival of the race of creatures he was interested in would not be addressed until the fifth volume. Which no longer existed except mayhap in one place: the Keltar library.

Whether he liked it or not, he was going to have to go home. Face his brother so he could search the Keltar collection. He'd wasted many months trying to find a solution on his own, and time was running out. If he waited much longer... well, he dare not wait longer.

And what of the lass? his honor roused.

He was too weary to bother lying to himself.

Mine.

He would endeavor to seduce her with her own desires first, make it easier for her, but should she resist, one way or another, she was going with him.

Chloe stood in the hot spray of seven jetting shower heads—three on each side, one above—sighing with pleasure. She'd been feeling like the poster child for grunge. The door was locked and the chair Dageus had brought her to prop beneath the handle was propped snugly beneath the handle.

After dreaming about him and waking in the middle of the night to find him watching her with virtually the same look he'd worn in her dream, she'd hardly been able to meet his gaze when he'd untied her this morning. Just thinking about the dream made her feel flushed and shaky.

I'm no' a good man, he'd said. He was right. He wasn't. He was a man who lived by his own rules. He stole other people's personal property—though he insisted he was "borrowing" and, oddly, left more valuable items. He held her captive—though he cooked scrumptious meals and, frankly, she'd agreed to cooperate for a bribe. Criminal at worst, at best he existed on the fringes of civilized society.

Then again, since she'd accepted his bribe, she supposed she was on those fringes now too.

Still, she mused, a truly bad man wouldn't bother warning a woman that he

wasn't a good man. A truly bad man wouldn't stop kissing a woman when she said stop.

What an enigma he was, and so strangely anachronistic! Though his penthouse was modern, his demeanor was distinctly old-world. His speech also was modern, yet he lapsed, at times, into an infrequent, curious formality, splashed with old Gaelic colloquialisms. There was something more to him than she was seeing. She could feel it dancing just at the edge of her comprehension, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't bring it into focus. And there was definitely something about his eyes...

She might not be as worldly as New York women, but she wasn't completely naive; she could feel danger in him—a woman would have to be dead not to. It dripped from him as liberally as testosterone oozed from his pores. Still, he tempered it with discipline and restraint. He had her at his complete mercy, and he'd not taken advantage of it.

She shook her head. Maybe for him, she thought, as easily as women must fall for him, it was the chase he enjoyed most.

Well, she thought, bristling, he could chase all he wanted. She might be on the fringes, but that didn't mean she was just going to up and fall in bed with him, no matter how much she might secretly long to be initiated into the exotic, erotic, mysterious Dageus MacKeltar club. Salient word there being "club"—as in, with *lots* of members.

With that resolved, she shampooed her hair twice (she'd never gone without a shower for two days straight before) and stood under the pulsing spray until she felt squeaky dean. And then a bit longer. Those massaging shower heads were to die for.

Wrapping herself in a luxurious towel, she dislodged the chair and unlocked the door.

When she opened it, she gaped. Half her wardrobe was piled neatly on the bed. She blinked. Yup, there it was. In tidy piles. Panties (uh-hmm, and *those* were staying firmly on her butt), bras, dresses, sweaters, jeans, a lacy little nightie, socks, boots, shoes, the works. They were stacked in "outfit" piles, she noted, bemused. He'd not just grabbed clothing, but had matched things together as if

envisioning her wearing them.

He'd even brought some of her books, she noticed, wandering over to the bed.

Three *romance* novels, the dastardly man. Scottish romance novels. What had he done? Poked through all her stuff while he was there? Right on top was *The Highlander's Touch*, one of her favorite novels about an immortal Highlander.

She snorted. The man was incorrigible. Bringing her steamy, sexy things to read. As if she needed any help thinking steamy thoughts around him.

She could hear him downstairs, talking quietly on the phone. She could smell the scent of fresh-brewed coffee.

And though she knew she should be offended that he'd broken into her apartment and rummaged through her drawers, he'd put much thought into his selections, and she was oddly charmed.

He hardly spoke to her all day. He was in a downright brooding mood. Controlled and remote. Perfectly polite, perfectly disciplined. Utterly self-contained. His eyes were... strange again, and she wondered if maybe they took on varying hues under different lighting, like hazel sometimes went from greenish-blue to greenish-brown. Not amber, they were the dull shade of copper just before it blackened.

She'd perched on the counter and watched him cook breakfast—kippers, tatties, toast, and porridge with cream and blueberries—eyeing him while his back was to her. For the first time she'd noticed his hair. She'd known it was long; she hadn't realized how long because he wore it pulled back. But now that she was behind him, she could see that he'd folded it up several times before binding it in a leather wrap.

She decided it must fall to his waist when it was free. The thought of his sleek black hair sweeping his naked muscled back drove her crazy.

She wondered if he ever wore it down. It seemed so in keeping with his character that it would be long and wild, but meticulously restrained unless he chose to free it.

She tried to make small talk, but he didn't rise to any of the bait she cast. Fishing,

trying to pick his brain, getting nothing but grunts and incoherent murmurs.

They sat together in silence for hours that afternoon, with Chloe delicately turning the pages of the Midhe Codex with tissues, and sneaking peeks at Dageus while he worked with the Book of Manannan, scribbling notes as he translated.

At five o'clock, she got up and turned the news on, wondering if there might be some small mention of her disappearance. As if, she thought wryly. One little girl gone missing in the wormy Big Apple? Both police and newscasters had better things to do.

He looked at her then, a hint of smugness playing about his lips.

She arched a questioning brow, but he said nothing. She listened absently while she read, then suddenly her attention was riveted to the screen.

"The Gaulish Ghost struck again last night, or so the police believe. Baffled might be the best way to describe New York's finest. At an unknown time, early this morning, all the artifacts previously stolen by the Gaulish Ghost were left at the front desk of the police station. Once again, no one saw a thing, which makes one wonder just what our police..."

There was more, but Chloe didn't hear it.

She glanced down at the text she was holding. Then at him.

"I bartered for that one, lass."

"You really did it," she breathed, shaking her head. "When you went to my apartment for my things, you took them back. I don't believe it."

"I told you I was merely borrowing them."

She stared at him, utterly flummoxed. He'd done it. He'd returned them! A sudden thought occurred to her. One she didn't much care for. "That means you're leaving soon, doesn't it?"

He nodded, his expression unfathomable.

"Oh." She pretended a hasty fascination with her cuticles to conceal the

disappointment that flooded her.

Hence she missed the cool, satisfied curve of his lips, a touch too feral to be called a smile.

Outside Dageus MacKeltar's penthouse, on a sidewalk crammed with people rushing to escape the city at the end of the long work week, one man wove his way through the crowd and joined a second man. They moved discreetly aside, loitering near a newsstand. Though clad in expensive dark suits, with short hair and nondescript features, both were marked by unusual tattoos on their necks. The upper part of a winged serpent arced above crisp collar and tie.

"He's up there. With a woman," Giles said softly. He'd just come down from rented rooms in the building on the opposite corner, where he'd been watching through binoculars.

"The plan?" his companion, Trevor, inquired softly.

"We wait until he leaves; with luck he'll leave her there. Our orders are to get him on the run. Force him to rely upon magic to survive. Simon wants him back overseas."

"How?"

"We'll make him a fugitive. Hunted. The woman makes things simpler than I'd hoped. I'll slip in, take care of her, alert the police, anonymously of course, and make his penthouse the stage of a cold-blooded, gruesome murder. Set all the cops in the city after him. He'll be forced to use his powers to escape. Simon believes he won't permit himself to be imprisoned. Though if he were, that might work to our advantage as well. I've no doubt time in a federal prison would hasten the transformation."

Trevor nodded. "And I?"

"You wait here. Too risky for both of us to go up. He's not to know we exist yet. If anything goes awry, ring Simon immediately."

Trevor nodded again, and they drifted apart, to settle back and wait. They were patient men. They'd been waiting for this moment all their lives. They were the lucky ones, those born in the hour of the Prophecy's fruition.

To a man, they would die to see the Draghar live again.

A messenger from a travel agency arrived shortly before the small crew of people who delivered dinner from Jean Georges.

Chloe couldn't begin to imagine what something like that cost—didn't think Jean Georges delivered—but she suspected that when one had as much money as Dageus MacKeltar, virtually anything could be bought.

While they ate before the fire in the living room, he continued working on the book that had initially landed her in this mess.

The envelope from the travel agency lay unopened on the table between them—a glaring reminder, chafing her. Earlier, while he'd been in the kitchen, not quite brazen enough to tear open the envelope, she'd snooped instead through his notes—what she could read of them. It appeared that he was translating and copying every reference to the Tuatha Dé Danaan, the race that had allegedly arrived in one of several waves of Irish invasions. There were a few scribbled questions about the identity of the Draghar, and numerous notes about Druids. Between her major in ancient civilizations and Grandda's tales, Chloe was well versed in most of it. With the exception of the mysterious Draghar, it was nothing she'd not read about before.

Still, some of his notes were written in languages she couldn't translate. Or even identify, and that gave her a kind of queasy feeling. She knew a great deal about ancient languages, from Sumerian to present, and could usually target, at least, area and approximate era. But much of what he'd penned—in an elegant minuscule cursive worthy of any illuminated manuscript—defied her comprehension.

What on earth was he looking for? He certainly seemed to be a man on a mission, working on his task with intense focus.

With each new bit of information she gathered about him, she grew more intrigued. Not only was he strong, gorgeous, and wealthy, but he was unarguably brilliant. She'd never met anyone like him before.

"Why don't you just tell me?" she asked point-blank, gesturing at the book.

He raised his gaze and she felt the heat of it instantly. Throughout the day, when

he hadn't been utterly ignoring her, the few times he'd looked at her, there'd been such blatant lust in his gaze that it was eroding every bit of common sense she possessed. The sheer force of his unguarded desire was more seductive than any aphrodisiac. No wonder so many women fell prey to his charm! He had a way of making a woman feel, with a mere glance, as if she were the most desirable woman in the world. How was a woman to stare into the face of such lust, and not feel lust in response?

He was leaving soon.

And he couldn't have made it more clear that he wanted to sleep with her.

Those two thoughts in swift conjunction were abjectly risky.

"Well?" she pressed irritably. Irritated with herself for being so weak and susceptible to him. Irritated with him for being so attractive. And he'd just *had* to go and return those texts, confounding her already confounded feelings about him. "What, already?"

He arched a dark brow, his gaze raking her in a way that made her feel as if a sudden sultry breeze had caressed her. "What if I told you, lass, that I seek a way to undo an ancient and deadly curse?"

She scoffed. He couldn't be serious. Curses weren't real. No more than the Tuatha Dé Danaan were real. Well, she amended, she'd never actually reached a firm conclusion about the Tuatha Dé or any of the "mythological" races said to have once inhabited Ireland. Scholars had dozens of arguments against their alleged existence.

Still... Grandda had believed.

A professor of mythology, he'd taught her that every myth or legend contained some reality and truth, however distorted it had grown over centuries of oral repetition by bards who'd adapted their recitations to the unique interests of their audiences, or scribes who'd heeded the dictums of their sponsors. The original content of uncounted manuscripts had been corrupted by shoddy translations and adaptations designed to reflect the political and religious clime of the day. Anyone who devoted time to a study of history eventually realized that historians had succeeded in gathering only a handful of sand from the vast,

uncharted desert of the past, and it was impossible to vouchsafe the terrain of the Sahara from a few mere grains.

"Do you believe in this stuff?" she asked, waving a hand at the jumble of texts, curious to know his take on history. As smart as he was, it was certain to be interesting.

"Much of it, lass."

She narrowed her eyes. "Do you believe the Tuatha Dé Danaan really existed?"

His smile was bitter. "Och, aye, lass. There was a time when I didn't, but I do now."

Chloe frowned. He sounded resigned, like a man who'd been given incontrovertible proof. "What made you believe?"

He shrugged and made no reply.

"Well, then, what kind of curse?" she pressed. This was fascinating stuff, the kind that had led her to her choice of career. It was like talking with Grandda again, debating possibilities, opening her mind to new ones.

He looked away, stared into the fire.

"Aw, come on! You're leaving soon, what harm is there in telling me? Who would I tell?"

"What if I told you that'tis *I* who am cursed?"

She glanced about at his opulent home. "I'd tell you a lot of people would like to be cursed like you."

"You'd never believe the truth." He flashed her another of those mocking smiles that didn't reach his eyes. She realized that she'd give a great deal to see him smile, actually smile and mean it.

"Try me."

It took him longer to respond this time, and when he did his gaze was filled with cynical amusement. "What if I told you, lass, that I'm a Druid from a time long

past?"

Chloe gave him an exasperated look. "If you don't want to talk to me, all you have to do is tell me that. But don't try to shut me up with nonsense."

With a tight smile, he nodded once, as if he'd satisfied himself of something. "What if I told you that when you kiss me, lass, I doona feel cursed? That mayhap your kisses could save me. Would you?"

Chloe caught her breath. It was such a silly thing to say, as silly as his joke about being a Druid... but so hopelessly romantic. That her kisses could save a man!

"I thought not." His gaze dropped back to the text and the heat of it had been so intense she felt chilled by its absence.

She frowned. Feeling like the biggest coward, feeling strangely defiant. She glared at the infernal envelope from the travel agency. "*When* are you leaving?" she asked irritably.

"On the morrow's eve," he said, without looking at her.

Chloe gaped. So soon? Tomorrow her grand adventure would be over? Though only yesterday she'd tried to escape him, she felt oddly deflated by her encroaching freedom.

Freedom didn't seem so sweet when it meant never seeing him again. She knew all too well what would happen: He would disappear from her life, and she would return to her job at The Cloisters (Tom would never fire her—not for missing a few days of work—she'd think of some excuse), and each time she looked at a medieval artifact she would think of him. Late at night, when she awakened filled with that terrible restlessness, she would sit in the dark, holding her *skean dhu*, wondering the worst question of all: What might have been? She would never again be wined and dined in a luxury penthouse on Fifth Avenue. Never again be looked at in such a way. Her life would resume its usual stultifying cadence. How long before she would forget that she'd once felt intrepid? Felt so briefly and intensely alive?

"Will you be coming back to Manhattan?" she asked in a small voice.

"Nay."

"Never?"

"Never."

A soft sigh escaped her. She fidgeted with a curly strand of hair, spiraling it around a finger. "What kind of curse?"

"Would you try to aid me if I was?" He looked up again and she felt a tension in him she couldn't fathom. As if her reply was somehow critical.

"Yes," she admitted, "I probably would." And it was true. Though she didn't approve of Dageus MacKeltar's methods, though there was much about him she didn't understand, were he suffering, she wouldn't be able to refuse him.

"Despite what I've done to you?"

She shrugged. "You haven't exactly hurt me." And he'd given her a *skean dhu*. Would he really let her keep it?

She was about to ask him that when, with a swift flick of his wrist, he tossed the envelope from the travel agency at her. "Then come with me."

Chloe caught the envelope by one end, her heart skipping a beat. "Wh-what?" She blinked at him, thinking she must have heard him wrong.

He nodded. "Open it."

Frowning, Chloe opened the envelope. She smoothed the papers wondering. Tickets to Scotland, for Dageus MacKeltar... and Chloe Zanders! Just seeing her name printed on the ticket gave her a little chill. Departing tomorrow night at seven o'clock from JFK. Arriving in London for a short layover, then on to Inverness. Within less than forty-eight hours she could be in Scotland!

If she dared.

She opened and closed her mouth several times.

Finally, "Oh, what *are* you?" she breathed disbelievingly. "The devil himself, come to tempt me?"

"Do I, lass? Do I tempt you?"

On *just about every freaking level*, she thought, but refused to give him the satisfaction of hearing that.

"I can't just up and travel to Scotland with some... some—" She broke off, sputtering.

"Thief?" he supplied lazily.

She snorted. "Okay, so you returned those things. So what? I hardly even know you!"

"Do you wish to? I'm leaving on the morrow. 'Tis now or never, lass." He waited, watching her. "Some chances come but once, Chloe, and swift are gone."

Chloe stared at him in silence, feeling utterly divided. Part of her was resolutely digging in her heels, ticking off on her fingers a thousand reasons why she absolutely could not do such a crazy, impulsive thing. Another part—a part that both horrified and intrigued her—was jumping up and down, shouting, "Say yes!" She had the sudden, strange desire to get up and go look at herself in the mirror, to see if she was changing outside as well as in.

Dare she do something so patently outrageous? Take such a chance? Put everything on the line and see what came of it?

On the other hand, dare she go back to her life the way it was? Go back to living in her tiny one-room plus bathroom-the-size-of-a-matchbox efficiency, making her solitary way to work each day, gaining solace only from playing with artifacts that would never be hers?

She'd tasted more, and—damn the man—now she wanted it.

What was the worst that could happen? If he had any intention of physically harming her, he could have done so long before now. The only real threat he posed was one *she* controlled: whether she would let him seduce her. Whether she would risk falling for a man who was, without question, an inveterate lone wolf and bad boy. A man who made no apologies and offered no comforting lies.

If she didn't fall for him, if she was a smart girl and kept her wits about her, pretty much the worst that could happen was that he might leave her stranded in Scotland. And that didn't strike her as completely unpalatable. If he did, she was

confident that, with her waitressing experience in college, she could get a job in a pub over there. She could stay awhile, see her grandda's homeland, her trip over paid for. She would survive. She would more than survive. She might finally live.

What did she have here? Her job at The Cloisters. No social life to speak of. No family. She'd been alone for years now, ever since Grandda had died. In fact, more lonely than she'd cared to admit. A little lost and rootless, which she suspected accounted for her determination to visit Grandda's village, in hopes that she might find some remnants of roots there.

Here was her golden opportunity, coupled with the promise of an adventure she'd never forget, at the side of a man she already knew she'd never be able to forget.

Oh, God, Zanders, she thought, marveling, you're talking yourself into this!

What if he was leaving tomorrow and hadn't asked you to go with him? a tiny inner voice pressed. What if he'd made it absolutely dear that he was leaving, and you would never see him again? What would you have done with this last night with him?

Chloe inhaled sharply, shocked at herself.

Under those hypothetical circumstances, hypothetically, of course, she might have taken her one incredible shot at a man like him, and let him take her to bed. Learned what he had to teach her, eagerly allowed herself to become the focus of all that smoldering promise of sensual knowledge in his exotic eyes.

Looked at that way, going to Scotland with him didn't seem quite so crazy.

He'd been watching her intently, and when she lifted her wide-eyed gaze to his, he rose abruptly from the couch opposite her and moved to stand before her. Impatiently, he pushed the coffee table aside and slipped to his knees at her feet, wrapping his hands around her calves. She felt the heat of his strong hands through her jeans. His mere touch made her shiver.

"Come with me, lass." His voice was low and urgent. "Think of your Scots blood. Doona you wish to stand on the soil of your ancestors? Doona you wish to see the heathery fields and moors? The mountains and the lochs? I'm no' a man who oft makes promises, but I promise you this"—he broke off, laughing

softly as if at some private joke—"I can show you a Scotland no other man could ever show you."

"But my job—"

"To hell with your job. You speak the old languages. Two of us can translate faster than one. I'll pay you to help me."

"Really? How much?" Chloe blurted, then flushed, appalled by how quickly she'd asked.

He laughed again. And she knew that he knew he just about had her.

"Select a piece—any piece—from my collection."

Her fingers curled covetously. He was the very devil; he had to be! He knew her price.

His voice dropped to an intimate purr. "Then choose two more. For one month of your time."

Her jaw dropped. Three artifacts, plus a trip to Scotland, for one month of her time? Was he *kidding*? She could sell any one of the artifacts upon her return to Manhattan (she made a mental note to choose one with which she could bear to part), go back to school, get her Ph.D. and work in any darned museum she wanted to! She could afford to take fabulous vacations, see the world. She—Chloe Zanders—could lead a glamorous, exciting life!

And all the devil ever wants in exchange, a small voice inside her purred caustically, is a soul.

She ignored it.

"Plus the *skean dhu*?" she clarified hastily.

"Aye."

"Why Inverness?" she asked breathlessly.

A shadow flitted across his gorgeous face. "'Tis where my brother Drustan, and his wife live." He hesitated a moment, then added, "He collects texts as well."

And if she'd been wavering before, that clinched it for her. His brother and his wife; they would be seeing his family. How dangerous could a man be if he was taking her to his family? It wasn't as if they'd be alone together all the time. They'd be with his family. If she was clever, she'd be able to insulate herself from his seduction. And to spend a month with him! To get to know him, learn what made such a man tick. Who knew what might happen in a month? *And the prince fell in love with the peasant girl...* Her heart was hammering.

"Say aye, lass. You want to, I see it in your eyes. Choose your pieces. We'll drop them off at your place before we leave."

"They'd never be safe in my apartment!" Even she knew how feeble that protest was.

"Then in one of those boxes... One of those..." He glanced askance.

"Safety deposit boxes at a bank, you mean?"

"Aye, that's it, lass."

"And I get the key?" she pounced.

He nodded, the light of victory glittering in his predatory gaze. In a movie, the devil would wear just such a look before he said, "Sign here."

"Why are you doing this?" she breathed.

"I told you. I want you."

She shivered again. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Mayhap'tis soul-alchemy. I doona ken. I doona care."

"I won't sleep with you, MacKeltar," she said suddenly. She didn't want him expecting that, needed it spelled out very carefully. If, at some point, she decided it was something she was willing to risk, that was one thing. But he needed to understand that it was not part of their bargain. Such things couldn't be bargained for. "Your artifacts purchase only my company as a translator. Not sex. That's not part of our deal."

"I doona wish it to be part of our'deal."

"You think you can seduce me," she accused.

He caught his bottom lip with his teeth, released it slowly, and smiled. It was such an obvious thing, that gesture, Chloe thought irritably, deliberately designed to focus her attention on his lips. She saw through it, she did—but that didn't stop it from working every darned time he did it. From making her self-consciously moisten her own. Damn and double-damn, she thought, the man was good.

You're already seduced, Chloe-lass, Dageus thought, watching her, *'tis but a matter of accepting, a mere matter of time now*. She wanted him. 'Twas no one-sided heat. Theirs was a dangerous attraction that defied logic or reason. She was as helplessly fascinated by him as he was by her. Each knew they *should* walk away from the other: he, because he had no right to corrupt her; she, because on some level she sensed that something was wrong with him. But neither was able to resist the pull. Devil and Angel: he, seduced by her lightness; she, tempted by his darkness. Each drawn to what they lacked.

"Well, you won't succeed," she said stiffly, piqued by his smug masculinity.

"I trust you'll forgive a man for tryin', lass. A kiss to seal it?"

"I mean it," she pushed. "I'm not going to be just another one of your women."

"I doona see any other women around here, lass," he said coolly. "Do you?"

Chloe rolled her eyes.

"Have I asked anyone else to go to Scotland?"

"I said okay, all right? I'm just making sure you understand the terms."

"Och, I understand the terms," he said in a dangerously soft voice.

She thrust out her hand. "Then shake."

When he raised it to his lips and kissed it, Chloe felt suddenly light-headed.

The moment felt, well... positively momentous. As if she'd just made a decision that would forever alter her life, in ways she couldn't even begin to imagine. The Greeks had a word for such a moment. They called it *Kairos*—a moment of

destiny.

Giddy with excitement, she rose and, with a connoisseur's eye and no mercy for the devil's wallet, began selecting her treasures.

Chapter 8

The man had never *really* tried to seduce her, Chloe decided the next morning when she raced down the steps and ran smack into him as he was stepping out of the first floor bathroom at the base of the stairs.

Seduction was this: one look at him in nothing but a towel.

Towering, two hundred pounds-plus of glistening golden skin poured over solid muscle, a sinfully small towel about his hips. Sculpted torso, rippling abs. A small cut marring his muscled chest, from their skirmish yesterday. A dark silky trail of hair disappearing beneath the soft white fabric.

Wet. Little beads of water shimmering on his skin. Thick black hair slicked back from his face, falling in a wet tangle to his waist.

And she knew that if she said the word, he would stretch that incredible body full-length on top of her and—

Chloe made a little puffing noise, as if the air had been knocked out of her. "G'morning," she managed.

"*Madainn mhath*, lass," he purred his reply in Gaelic, steadying her by the elbows. "I trust you slept well without the bonds?"

He may not have tied her, but he'd slept outside her door. She'd heard him out there, moving about. "Yes," she said a bit breathlessly.

The man was just too beautiful for any woman's peace of mind.

He stared down at her a long moment. "We've much to do before we leave," he said, releasing her arms. "I'll be but a few moments getting dressed."

He skirted around her and went up the stairs. She turned, bemused, watching him with wide eyes. He hadn't even tried to kiss her, she thought, irritated with him that he hadn't, and irritated with herself for being irritated that he hadn't. Heavens, the man filled her with impossible duality. She was determined not to be seduced, yet she relished his seduction. It made her feel utterly feminine and alive.

Holy *cow*, she thought, watching him. With each step he ascended, the muscles in his legs flexed. Perfect calves, hard-as-rock thighs. Tight butt. Trim waist flaring to muscular shoulders. Absolutely ripped with muscle, he was powerful-looking in a lean, hungry way. Time seemed to spin out dreamily while she watched him.

"Oh!" she gasped suddenly, going rigid with shock.

Had he *really* done that?

God! How would she ever get that vision of him out of her mind?

At the top of the stairs the blasted man had dropped his towel!

As he was taking that last step. Legs slightly parted. Giving her the briefest glimpse of... *oh!*

She was still trying to breathe and not succeeding very well, when she heard a soft, husky and *very* smug laugh.

Shameless womanizer!

Dageus left when Chloe got in the shower. It was either leave, or join her, and she was not yet ready to permit what he needed. Wiser not to imagine stepping into the shower behind her, taking her slippery, wet body in his arms, getting his hands on those magnificent bare breasts. He'd have her in Scotland anon, and there in his beloved land, he would claim her completely.

She would have let him kiss her, he'd seen it in the dilation of her eyes, in the softening of that lush petal-soft mouth.

But there was much to do before they left, and a skilled lover knew there were times when heightening a woman's anticipation was far more seductive than satisfying it. So, with a provocative bit of aloofness, he'd resisted the kisses he might have claimed and shown her instead what she was denying herself. What she could have if she but said the word. All of him, his insatiable desire, his need, his stamina, his determination to pleasure her as no other man could. Slave to her every carnal wish. He knew she'd seen the heavy weight of his testicles betwixt his legs and the thick head of his shaft below them as he'd taken the last step.

Best she get acquainted with his body now, in slow degrees.

He smiled, as the cab came to a dead stop in bumper-to-bumper traffic, recalling her soft, shocked little gasp. The knowledge that she had never been touched by another man inflamed him. He swallowed, his mouth dry with anticipation.

She'd given him a list of things she needed, and had told him her passport was in her jewelry box. She'd said aye. She'd agreed to come with him. He'd not liked the thought of having to coerce her.

He may not have yet seduced her into his bed, but he'd succeeded in seducing her into his life in countless other ways, each an invisible, silken knot, binding her to him as he lured her deeper into his world.

He was obsessed with her, as he'd never been with any other woman. He wanted to tell her more of his story. He'd been testing the waters last eve, feeling her out, trying to determine how much she might be able to take. He'd never once considered telling a woman aught about himself—particularly not one he hadn't yet bedded—but the possibility of a woman such as Chloe knowing what he was and choosing to be his woman anyway made the blood burn like fire in his veins. A part of him wanted to cram his reality down her throat, forcing her to accept him, with no excuses offered. A wiser part of him, the man he'd used to be, warned against such ruthlessness.

Slowly. He need employ utmost care and caution if he hoped to achieve his aim.

Late last eve, while watching her dither over which artifacts to choose, he'd realized with startling clarity, that it wasn't merely her body he wanted in his bed, he wanted *all* of her, given without reservation. He wanted it nigh as much as he wanted to be free of the evil within him, as if the two were somehow intertwined. And the animal in him sensed her killing weakness: Chloe was a lass who could be trapped by the man who won her heart. Netted and kept for life. His strategy was no longer simple seduction; he was vying for the core of her, her very lifeblood.

A woman such as she—entrust you with her heart? his honor mocked. *Have you lost your mind as well as your souls?*

"Haud yer wheesht," he growled softly.

The cab driver glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Eh, what?"

"I wasn't talking to you."

And if you somehow manage to win her, what, then, will you do with her? his honor taunted. *Promise her a future?*

"Doona be trying to steal my now," Dageus gritted. "'Tis all I own." And since her advent into his life, she now held more interest for him than it had in a long time. He was a man who'd succeeded at living since the eve he'd turned dark, only by doing it hour to hour.

Shrugging at the cabbie who was now watching him with blatant unease, he reached in his pocket, double-checking to be certain the list and her key were there.

The key wasn't. Thinking back, he realized he'd left it on the kitchen counter.

Though no one was more adept at breaking and entering than he, he did it only when necessary. And never in broad daylight.

He eyed the backed-up traffic impatiently. By the time the cab driver got them turned around in this mess, he could, like as not, be back at the penthouse on foot.

He shoved fare through the slot and stepped out into the rain.

Chloe shaved her legs with one of Dageus's razors (studiously ignoring the cheeky little voice that volunteered the wholly unsolicited opinion that a girl didn't need to shave when it was so cold out, unless she was planning to take her pants off for some reason), then stepped out of the shower and smoothed on lotion.

She moved into the bedroom, slipped into panties and bra, then packed a few things in the luggage he'd set out for her while the lotion absorbed into her skin.

She was going to Scotland.

She couldn't believe it—how much her life had changed in just a few days. How much *she* seemed to be changing. In four days, to be exact. Four days ago she'd entered his penthouse, and today she was getting ready to fly across the ocean

with him, with no idea what might come.

She shook her head, wondering if she'd completely lost her mind. She refused to ponder that thought too hard. When she thought about it, it seemed all wrong.

But it *felt* right.

She was going and that was that. She wasn't willing to let him walk out of her life this afternoon—forever. She was drawn to him as irresistibly as she was drawn to artifacts. Logic didn't have a damn thing to do with it.

Her mind raced over last-minute details and she decided she *had* to get word to Tom. He was probably already sick with worry and if he didn't hear from her for another month, he'd have the entire police department in an uproar. But she didn't want to talk to him on the phone, he would ask her too many questions; and the answers weren't completely convincing, even to her.

E-mail! That was it. She could shoot him a short note on the computer in the study.

She glanced at the clock. Dageus should be gone for at least an hour. She slipped into her jeans, tugged a T-shirt over her head, and hurried downstairs, wanting to get it out of the way immediately.

What would she say? What excuse could she possibly give him?

I met the Gaulish Ghost and he's not exactly a criminal Actually, he's the sexiest, most intriguing, smartest man I've ever met and he's taking me to Scotland and he's paying me with ancient artifacts to help him translate texts because he thinks he's somehow cursed.

Yeah. Right. That coming from the woman who'd endlessly berated Tom for his less than lily-white ethics. Even if she told him the truth, he wouldn't believe it of her. *She* didn't believe it of her.

She went into the study and was briefly sidetracked by the artifacts scattered about. She would never get used to such casual treatment of priceless relics. Scooping up a handful of coins, she sorted through them. Two had horses etched on them. Replacing the others on the desk, she studied the two coins wonderingly. The ancient Continental Celts had etched horses on their coins.

Horses had been treasured creatures, symbolic of wealth and freedom, meriting their own goddess, Epona, who'd been commemorated in more surviving inscriptions and statues than any other early goddess.

"Nah," she said, snorting. "There's no way they're that old." They were in such mint condition that they looked as if they'd been fashioned only a few years ago.

But then, she mused, all of his property did. Looked new, that was. Impossibly new. New enough that she'd entertained the possibility that they might be brilliant forgeries. Very few artifacts survived the centuries in such impeccable condition. Without the proper means to authenticate them, she had to trust her judgment. And her judgment said—impossible though it was to believe—his artifacts were genuine.

A sudden image rose in her mind: Dageus, dressed in full Scots tartan and regalia, his hair wild, war braids plaited at his temples, swinging the claymore that hung above the fireplace. The man exuded Celtic warrior, as if he'd been transplanted in time.

"You are *such* a dreamer, Zanders," she chided herself. Shaking her head to scatter her fanciful thoughts, she replaced the coins in their pile, and turned her attention back to the task at hand. She turned on the computer, and tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for it to boot up. While it whirled and hummed, she sidled out into the living room and eyed the answering machine, twirling a strand of curly wet hair around a finger. The phone had rung many times since he'd turned the volume down.

She peered at it. There were nine messages.

Her hand hovered over the play button for several indecisive moments. She wasn't proud of her proclivity to snoop, but figured as far as sins went, it wasn't chiseled in stone on the Top Ten. After all, a girl had a right to arm herself with all the knowledge she could, didn't she?

It would be naive and foolish not to.

Her finger inched down toward the play button. Hesitated, and inched again. Just as she was about to press it, the phone rang loudly, startling a little screech out of her. Heart hammering, she skittered back into the study feeling weirdly caught

and guilty.

Then, with an exasperated snort, she dashed right back out there and turned the volume up.

Katherine again. Sultry-voiced and purring. Ugh.

Scowling, Chloe turned it back down, deciding she'd really rather *not* hear them all. She didn't need anymore reminders that she was one of many.

A few moments later, she logged onto the Internet, signed into her Yahoo! account and typed swiftly:

Tom, my Aunt Irene (God forgive her, she didn't have one) was taken suddenly ill and I had to leave immediately for Kansas. I'm so sorry I wasn't able to get in touch with you before, but she's in critical condition and I've been staying at the hospital. I'm not sure when I'll be back. It may be a few weeks or longer. I'll try to call you soon. Chloe.

How neatly she lied, she thought wonderingly. She was smoking cigars, accepting bribes and lying. What was happening to her?

Dageus MacKeltar, that was what.

She reread it several times before hitting the send button. She was still staring at the "your message has been sent" message, feeling a little shaky about what she'd just done because it made it all seem so final, when she heard the door open and close.

He was back already!

She hit the shut down button, praying it would also disconnect the Internet. Though she had nothing to feel guilty about, she preferred to dodge a potential dispute. Especially after almost listening to his messages. God, he would have walked in and caught her doing it! How humiliating that would have been!

Taking a deep breath, she pasted an innocent expression on her face. "What are you doing back already?" she called as she strolled out of the study.

Then gasped, startled, and drew up short near the doorway to the kitchen.

A man, dressed in a dark suit, was standing in the living room, glancing through the books on the coffee table. Of average height, wiry build, with short brown hair, he was well dressed and had a cultured air about him.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who strolled at will into Dageus's unlocked penthouse. He really should start locking it, she thought. What if she'd still been in the shower, or had wandered downstairs in a towel to find a stranger there? It would have scared the bejeezus out of her.

The man turned at her gasp. "I'm sorry I startled you, ma'am," he apologized gently. "Might Dageus MacKeltar be about?"

British accent, she noted. And a funny tattoo on his neck. Didn't seem quite in character with the rest of him. He didn't seem the tattoo sort.

"I didn't hear you knock," Chloe said. She didn't think he had. Maybe Dageus's friends didn't. "Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes. I'm Giles Jones," he said. "Is he in?"

"Not at the moment, but I'll be happy to tell him you stopped by." She peered at him, curiosity never dormant. Here was one of Dageus's friends. What might he tell her about him? "Are you a *close* friend of his?" she fished.

"Yes." He smiled. "And who might you be? I can't believe he's not mentioned such a lovely woman to me."

"Chloe Zanders."

"Ah, he has exquisite taste," Giles said softly.

She blushed. "Thank you."

"Where did he go? Will he be returning soon? Might I wait?"

"It'll probably be an hour or so. Can I give him a message for you?"

"An hour?" he echoed. "Are you certain? Perhaps I could wait; he might be back sooner." He glanced questioningly at her.

Chloe shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Jones. He went to get some things for

me; we're leaving for Scotland later and—"

She broke off as the man's demeanor changed abruptly.

Gone was the disarming smile. Gone was the appreciative gaze.

Replaced by a cold, calculating expression. And—her brain seemed to resist processing this fact—there was suddenly, bewilderingly, a knife in his hand.

She shook her head sharply, unable to absorb the bizarre turn of events.

With a menacing smile, he moved toward her.

Still trying to get some dim grasp on the situation, she said stupidly. "You're n-not his f-friend." Oh, *gee, did the knife give it away, Zanders?* she snapped at herself silently. *Get a grip. Find a blasted weapon.* She inched slowly backward, into the kitchen, afraid to make a sudden move.

"Not yet," was the man's bizarre reply as he paced her.

"What do you want? If it's money, he has lots of money. Tons of money. And he'll happily give it to you. And there are artifacts," she babbled. She was almost there. Surely there was a knife lying on the counter somewhere. "Worth a fortune. I'll help you pack them up. There are oodles of things here you can take. I won't get in your way a bit. I promise, I'll just—"

"It's not money I'm after."

Oh, God. A dozen horrid scenarios, each worse than the last, flashed through her mind. He'd duped her into freely admitting that she was alone for an hour by pretending to know Dageus. How gullible she'd been! *You can take the girl out of Kansas, but you can't take Kansas out of the girl,* she thought, hysteria bubbling inside her.

"Oh, would you look at that! I've mistaken the time! He's due back any minute —"

A sharp bark of laughter. "Nice try."

When he lunged for her, she scrambled backward, adrenaline flooding her. Frantically, with hands made clumsy by fear, she snatched things off the counter

and flung them at him. The thermal coffeepot bounced off his shoulder, spewing coffee everywhere; the butcher block hit him squarely in the chest. Flailing behind her, she grabbed one Baccarat goblet after another from the sink and flung them at his head. He ducked and dodged, and glass after glass exploded against the wall behind him, raining down on the floor.

He hissed with fury and kept coming.

Gasping for breath, dangerously close to hyperventilating, Chloe groped for more arsenal. A pot, a colander, some keys, a timer, a skillet, spice jars, more glasses. She needed a freaking weapon! In the midst of this damned museum, surely she could get her hands on one blasted knife! But her bare feet kept slipping in coffee as she tried to avoid both her assailant and the broken glass.

Afraid to take her eyes off him, she fumbled for a drawer behind her and felt frantically about: towels.

The next drawer: trash bags and Reynolds Wrap. She flung both boxes at him.

Glass crunching beneath his shoes, he advanced, backing her against the counter.

Wine bottle. Full. *Thank you, God.* She kept it behind her back and went motionless.

He did exactly what she'd hoped. Gave her the bum's rush, and she smashed the bottle down on his head with all her might, drenching them both with glass-spiked wine.

He grabbed her around the waist as he went down, taking her with him. She was no match for the wiry strength of the man as he wrestled her onto her back beneath him.

She caught a flash of silver perilously close to her face. She went limp for a moment, just long enough to make him wonder, then twisted and went for his groin with her knee and his eyes with her thumbs, whispering a silent thank-you to Jon Stanton in Kansas, who'd taught her "ten dirty tricks" when they'd dated in high school.

"Ow, you bloody *bitch!*" When he convulsed reflexively, Chloe pounded at him with her fists, scrabbling desperately to get out from beneath him.

His hand locked on her ankle. She grabbed a piece of glass, heedless of her numerous cuts and turned on him, hissing and spitting like a cat.

And when she slashed at his hand on her ankle, a fierce triumph filled her. She may be on the floor, bloody and crying, but she was *not* going to die without one hell of a fight.

Dageus stepped into the anteroom, wondering if Chloe might still be in the shower. He entertained a brief vision of her, gloriously nude and wet with all that lovely hair trailing down her back. Hand on the doorknob, he smiled, then flinched when he heard a crash, followed by cursing.

Pushing the door open, he gaped, incredulity and shock paralyzing him for a precious moment.

Chloe—dripping red liquid that his mind *refused* to accept might be blood—was standing in the living room, turned toward the kitchen, her back to him, clutching the claymore from above the fireplace with both hands, crying and hiccupping violently.

A man stepped out of the kitchen, his murderous gaze fixed on Chloe, a knife in his hand.

Neither of them registered his presence.

"Chloe-lass, back away," Dageus hissed. Instinctively, he used the Voice of Power, lacing the order with a spell of Druid compulsion, lest she be too frightened to move on her own.

The man startled and saw him then, his face registering shock and... something more, a thing Dageus couldn't quite define. An expression that made no sense to him. Recognition? Awe? The intruder's gaze darted to the door behind Dageus, then to the open doors leading to the rain-slicked terrace.

Snarling, Dageus began stalking. No need to rush, the man had no place to go. Chloe had responded to his command and backed away toward the fireplace, where she stood clutching the claymore tightly, white as a ghost.

She was still standing. That was a good sign. Surely the red stains couldn't *all* be blood.

"Are you all right, lass?" Dageus kept his gaze fixed on the intruder. Power was roiling inside him. Ancient power, power that was not his, power that was untrustworthy and bloodthirsty, goading him to destroy the man using archaic, forbidden curses. To make him die a slow and horrific death for daring to touch his woman.

Fisting his hands, Dageus struggled to close his mind to it. He was a man, not an ancient evil. More than man enough to handle this himself. He knew—though he knew not how he knew—that should he use the dark power within him to kill, it would seal his doom.

Hiccup. "Uh-huh, I think so." More sobs.

"You son of a bitch. You hurt my woman," Dageus growled, moving inexorably forward, backing the man out onto the terrace. Forty-three floors above the street.

The intruder glanced over his shoulder at the low stone wall encircling the terrace, as if gauging the distance, then back at Dageus again.

What he did next was so strange and unexpected that Dageus failed to react in time to stop him.

His eyes blazing with fanatic zeal, the man bowed his head. "May I serve the Draghar with my death, as I failed with my life."

Dageus was still trying to process the fact that he'd said "the Draghar" when the man spun about, leaped up onto the wall, and took a swan dive into forty-three floors of nothingness.

Chapter 9

"What is that stuff?" Chloe asked, wincing.

"Easy, lass. 'Tis but a salve that will speed the healing." Dageus smoothed it on her myriad cuts, murmuring healing spells in an ancient tongue she'd not know. A language so long dead that the scholars of her century had no name for it. The sticky red on her clothing had been wine not blood. She'd come away remarkably unscathed, all considered, with cuts on her hands and feet, a few scratches on her arms, but no debilitating injury.

"That does feel better," she exclaimed.

He glanced at her, forcing himself to look in her eyes, not at the lush, delectable curves scarce concealed by her delicate, lacy bra and panties. After the man had jumped, Dageus had stripped Chloe more roughly than he'd intended, frantic to know the extent of her wounds. Now she sat beside him on the sofa, facing him, her wee feet in his lap as he tended them.

"Here, lass." He snatched the cashmere throw from the back of the sofa and draped it around her shoulders, pulling it snugly about her so it covered her from neck to ankles. She blinked slowly, as if only now realizing her state of undress, and he knew her mind was still numb from her ordeal.

He forced his attention back to her feet. The healing spells were pushing him ever nearer the limits of his control. He'd used too much magic in the past few days. He needed a long space of time with no spells to recover.

Or her.

The longest he'd ever gone without a woman, since the eve he'd turned dark, was a sennight. At the end of it, he'd been up on that terrace wall himself. Clutching a bottle of whisky, dancing a Scots reel atop the slippery stones in the midst of an ice storm, letting fate choose which side he fell off first.

"He lied to me," she said, raking her hair, still damp from the shower, back from her face with a bandaged hand. "He said he was a friend of yours and I told him you wouldn't be back for an hour." Her eyes widened. "Why *did* you come

back?"

"I forgot the key, lass."

"Oh, God," she breathed, looking panicked all over again. "What if you hadn't?"

"But I did. You're safe now." *Never again will I permit danger to touch you.*

"You didn't know him, did you? I mean, he just said that to find out how long you'd be gone, right?"

"Nay, lass, I'd never seen the man before." That much was true. "'Tis as you thought, he lied to find out when I'd be returning, how long you'd be alone. He may have gotten my name anywhere. The mail call, the phone book." He wasn't listed in either of those places. But she didn't need to know that.

"Why would Security let him up?"

Dageus shrugged. "I'm sure they didn't. There are ways to circumvent Security," he evaded, scanning the damage resultant from the attack. He needed to tidy the kitchen before the police inevitably came to question the occupants on his side of the building. Fortunately, there were twenty-eight terraces below his, down to the fourteenth level, and the police would, he knew, in that wide berth the rich were ceded in any century, leave the penthouse level for last.

His mind raced over details: eradicate all sign of a tussle, pack up the last two tomes, stop at her place for her passport, take her artifacts to the bank, get them to the airport. He was glad they were leaving today. He'd dragged her into something even he didn't understand, and only he could protect her.

And he would protect her. She was keeper of his *Selvar*. His life was now her shield.

May I serve the Draghar... the man had said.

It made no sense to him. He'd been so startled to hear those words on the man's lips that he'd stared blankly. He was furious with himself because, had he moved or spoken more quickly, he could have forced answers from the man.

Apparently, someone knew more about his problem than he himself did. How? Who could *possibly* know what he'd gotten himself into? Not even Drustan knew

for certain! Who the blethering hell were the Draghar? And in what fashion had the man been serving them?

If they were, as he'd considered earlier, some part of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and if they had indeed decided to hunt him down, why harm an innocent woman? And if they were the allegedly immortal race, why send a mortal to do their bidding? There was no question the man had been mortal. Dageus had seen him. He'd landed on a car, or rather, merged with the car.

While he'd cleansed Chloe's wounds, he'd quizzed her thoroughly about the intruder, in part to keep her talking so she wouldn't go into shock. The man had identified himself to her as Giles Jones, though Dageus suffered no illusions'twas his real name. The man had recognized him somehow. He might not have known Giles Jones, but Giles Jones had known him. How long had the man been watching him? Spying on him. Waiting for a moment to strike.

A sudden fear for his brother and Gwen gripped him. If he was being watched, was Drustan also? What curse had he brought down upon himself and his clan?

He shook his head, sorting through dozens of questions for which he had no answers. Thinking was of no avail. Action was necessary now. He needed to get things tidied up, get them out of the country, then he could concentrate on discovering who the Draghar were.

He finished with the last cut and glanced up at her. She was watching him in silence, her eyes huge, but the color was slowly returning to her face.

"Forgive me, lass. I should have been here to protect you," he apologized gravely. " 'Twill never happen again."

"It wasn't your fault." She gave a shaky little laugh. "You can't be held responsible for all the criminals in the city. It's obvious he wasn't in his right mind. I mean—my God, *he jumped*. He killed himself." She shook her head, still unable to fathom it. "Did he say something before he jumped? It looked like he did."

She'd been too far away to hear it. " 'Twas gibberish. Made no sense. I'm sure you've the right of it. Like as not he was crazy or..." He shrugged.

"On drugs," she said, nodding. "His eyes were weird.

Like he was some kind of fanatic. I really thought he was going to kill me." A pause, then she said. "I fought back. I didn't just collapse."

She looked both shocked by and proud of that fact, and well she should be, he thought. How difficult it must have been for her, as wee as she was, to face a man so much larger than she, who'd been wielding a weapon with the intent to kill. It was one thing for a man of his size and girth, not to mention training, to enter battle, but her? The lass had courage.

"You did well, Chloe. You're an extraordinary woman." Dageus tucked a stray, damp curl behind her ear. He was beginning to lose the struggle to keep his gaze from hungrily roving her body, knowing she was nearly naked beneath the soft throw. A peculiar icy heat was flooding his veins. Dark and demanding. Need that cared not that she had been traumatized, need that endeavored to convince him that sex would make her feel better.

The tatters of his honor did not agree. But they were tatters and he needed to get her away from him. Fast.

"Are your feet better?"

She slid them from his lap to the floor, then stood, testing them.

He glanced out the window hastily, fisting his hands to keep from reaching for her. He knew if he touched her now, he would drop her, spread her and push himself inside her. His thought patterns were changing, the way they did when it had been too long. Becoming primitive, animal.

"Yes," she said, sounding surprised. "Whatever that salve is, it's amazing."

"Why doona you go up and finish packing your things?" His voice sounded thick and guttural, even to his own ears. He rose swiftly and moved toward the kitchen.

"But what about the police? Shouldn't we call the police?"

He paused, but kept his back to her. "They're already out there, lass." Go, he willed silently, desperately.

"But shouldn't we talk to them?"

"I'll take care of everything, Chloe." He used a brush of compulsion that time and told her to forget about the police. Just enough magic to ease her mind, to help her trust that he would handle things. To make her not wonder later why she'd not been questioned. So far as the police would be concerned, the man hadn't fallen from *his* terrace, but she need not know that.

He'd just entered the kitchen when she came up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Dageus?"

He stiffened and closed his eyes. He didn't turn around. *Christ, lass, please. I doona want to rape you.*

"Hey, turn around," she said, sounding mildly peeved.

Teeth clenched, he turned.

"Even though it's not like you did it on purpose, thank you for forgetting the key," she said, then cupped his face in her wee hands, stood on her tiptoes and pulled him down to plant a soft kiss on his lips. "You probably saved my life."

He could feel muscles leaping in his jaw. Leaping in his entire body. Had to unclench his teeth to manage a thick, "Probably?"

"I *was* putting up a good fight," she pointed out. "And I'd gotten to the claymore."

A wan but cheeky smile, then, blessedly, she moved toward the stairs.

At the foot of them, she glanced back. "I know you probably don't care, because we're leaving, but you should tell the building manager that this penthouse has some serious heating problems. Would you mind turning it up a bit?" She rubbed her arms through the coverlet and, without waiting for an answer, hurried up the steps.

Five minutes later, he was still leaning against the wall, shaking from the battle he'd almost lost when she'd so innocently touched her lips to his. She'd kissed him as if he were honorable, in control. Safe.

As if he weren't the man who'd been about to take her virginity by force. As if he weren't dark and dangerous. Once, he'd gone to Katherine when he'd been in

nearly as bad a state. He'd seen the fear mixed with the excitement in her eyes when he'd taken her roughly, without speaking a word, in her kitchen where he'd found her. Had known she'd sensed it in him, the darkness. Had known it had turned her on.

But not Chloe. She'd kissed him gently. Beast and all.

Trevor watched Dageus MacKeltar and his companion from a distance as they exited the building onto Fifth Avenue. The police had been crawling all over the place for hours, removing Giles's body, and questioning witnesses, but by midafternoon, had moved on, leaving two grizzled and grouchy detectives in their wake.

He felt no grief for Giles; his death had been swift, and death was not a thing they feared, as the Druid sect of the Draghar believed in the transmigration of the soul. Giles would live again in some other body, some other time.

As the Draghar would live again in the Scotsman's body, once they'd taken full possession of him.

Trevor was awed that the man had managed thus far to fend off the transformation. As powerful as the Draghar were, Dageus MacKeltar must be uncommonly powerful in his own right.

But Trevor had no doubt the Prophecy would come to pass as had been promised. No man could contain such power and fail to use it. Day by day, it would seep into him until he no longer knew he was being transformed. They simply needed to provoke him, to goad and corner him. The use of dark magic for dark purposes would plunge him into an abyss from which there was no escape.

Then, the Draghar would walk the earth again. Then, all the power, all the knowledge the Tuatha Dé Danaan had stolen from them millennia ago would be restored. The Draghar would teach them the Voice of Power that brought death with a mere word, and the secret ways to move through time. When their numbers were many and strong, they would hunt the Tuatha Dé Danaan and take what should have been theirs long ago. That which the Tuatha Dé Danaan had ever denied the Draghar: the secret of immortality. Eternal life, no chancy rebirth necessary.

They would be gods.

Trevor studied the woman intently. Tiny little bit, she was, and he wondered how Giles had ended up going over that terrace. Had it been by choice? Had Dageus MacKeltar thrown him off? Surely the small female hadn't done it. She didn't amount to much. Barely topped five feet.

The Scot towered over her. The Draghar had been given a mighty vessel, his form strong, that of a warrior. Men would respond well to his innate authority. Even as Trevor thought that, he noted how the crowds parted for him, instinctively moving out of his way, and he strode as if he knew they would. No hesitation in the man, none whatsoever. Even from his safe distance, he could feel the power rolling off him.

When the Scot glanced down at the woman, Trevor's eyes narrowed.

Possessiveness in his gaze. Protectiveness in the way he shielded her body from passersby, his intent gaze constantly scrutinizing his surroundings. Simon would not be pleased.

Before Trevor had found his calling in the Order, he'd run the con, quite successfully, and the cardinal rule of such business applied here: isolate the mark; the quarry falls faster alone.

He paced them, at a cautious distance.

They paused outside a bank and Trevor glided closer, dropped a few coins and bent to scoop them up. Listening, to see if he could overhear any conversation.

And finally he heard what he needed; they were planning to fly out to Scotland some time this evening.

He melted back into a small duster of pedestrians and slipped out a cell phone. It would be a simple matter to have one of his computer-savvy brethren find out from which airport and when, and book him on the flight as well.

Speaking swiftly, he filled Simon in.

And Simon's instructions were precisely what he expected.

Hours later, Trevor slid into a seat a dozen rows behind them. He would have

preferred to sit nearer, but the flight wasn't full, and he worried that the Scot might spot him.

He'd shadowed them all afternoon and not once gotten the chance to strike. Blades were his sect's weapon of choice, each spilling of blood a ritual in and of itself, yet he'd had to abandon his weapons before boarding. His tie would have served well to strangle her, if he'd only been able to get a moment with her alone.

He wished he knew what had transpired in the penthouse. Something had put Dageus MacKeltar on the alert for another attack. If caught, Giles was supposed to make it look like a robbery, or the work of a sociopath, whichever best fit the moment. Yet it was apparent that the Scot was anticipating another attempt. He'd not once left the woman's side. When twice she'd gone to the rest room in the airport, he'd trailed her there, waited in the doorway, and escorted her back. When too many people for his comfort had sat near them in the waiting area, he'd coaxed her off for a walk.

The bloody man was a walking shield.

Trevor massaged the back of his neck, sighing.

He would regroup in Scotland, acquire weapons, and eventually the man's guard would drop. If only for a few moments. A few moments were all he would need.

Chapter 10

The flight from JFK to London was only half full, the lights dimmed for the comfort of night travelers, the seats comfy (they had a whole row to themselves and had pushed all the armrests up), and Chloe fell asleep shortly after takeoff.

Now, stirring drowsily, she kept her eyes shut, mulling over the events of the day. It had whizzed by with incredible speed, from the attack, to the packing, to going to her place for her passport, to getting a box at the bank for her artifacts (*her* artifacts!), to a hasty late lunch/early dinner, and finally the trip to the airport.

No wonder she'd fallen asleep. She'd not slept much the night before, nervous and excited about the decision she'd made to accompany Dageus to Scotland. Then the day had been crammed full, and the shock of the attack, alone, had nearly drained her of energy. She still couldn't believe it had happened; it seemed surreal, as if she'd watched it on TV or it had happened to someone else. She'd been living in New York, in one of the less savory sections for almost a year, and nothing bad had ever happened to her. She'd never been mugged, never been harassed on the subway, in fact, hadn't encountered any adversity, so she supposed maybe her number had finally come up. Unless, of course, the police determined some other mot—

That thought was slippery and abruptly vanished from her mind.

Though it troubled her that her assailant had killed himself (and if that didn't demonstrate how crazy he'd been, she didn't know what would), she knew he'd intended to injure her severely, if not kill her. Pragmatism tempered her emotion. The simple fact was: She was grateful she'd survived. Sorry the man had been so crazy that he'd attacked her, then taken a leap off the terrace, but glad to be alive all the same. It was startling how having one's life placed in jeopardy reduced one to the basics.

Had Dageus not returned—that thought made her shudder—she would have fought to the death. She was discovering all kinds of parts of her personality she'd not known existed. She'd always worried that if someone attacked her, she might just crumple, or freeze helplessly. Had always wondered if she was a coward at heart.

Thank God she wasn't. And thank God Dageus had forgotten the key.

She'd been so gullible. Giles "Jones," indeed. What a tip-off that should have been. But she'd not given it a second thought because the man had looked and acted so darned normal, at first. Then again, she'd read somewhere that most serial killers looked like the guy next door.

When Dageus had walked in, the man had gotten the strangest look on his face. She couldn't quite pin it down. .

Mentally shrugging, she pushed the grim thoughts away. It had been awful; she'd never been so frightened in her life, but it was over, and she would look forward, not behind. Dwelling on it would make her feel terrified all over again. A freaky, awful thing had happened right before she'd left New York, but she would not let it characterize her time there, nor cast a pall over her future. He was dead; she would not grant the man the success of making her feel terrorized. In twenty-four years, she'd been the victim of an attack once. She could live with those odds. *Would* live with them, would not let it make her frightened in the future. More cautious? Absolutely. Afraid? Not a chance.

She was on her way to Scotland, with a man that made her feel more alive than anyone she'd ever known.

And she was determined to enjoy every last minute of it.

She wondered what Grandda would have made of Dageus.

Chloe Zanders. Chloe... MacKeltar.

Zanders, she chided herself instantly, *stop thinking like that!* She was not going to romanticize things. She'd promised herself that earlier, while sitting in the airport with him, waiting for their flight to leave. He'd been so attentive, walking her to the ladies' room, taking her for a snack, never leaving her side, yet with that eternal coolness. That infuriating reserve, that tight containment. It was no wonder women fell hard for him; such reserve challenged a woman, made her want to be the one who got inside Dageus MacKeltar. But Chloe wasn't going to make that mistake. So far as she could see, she was woman-of-the-hour, nothing more. She was determined to be smart about things, to view the trip as an adventure, to take things purely at face value and not read any more into them

than there was.

Still, Grandda would've liked it... Her thoughts returned to touch briefly on the morning again, but on a less disturbing part. After the man had jumped, Dageus had stripped her fast and frantically, the look on his face enough to mute any protest. Scarcely bridled rage had emanated from him, making her think her assailant might just have been granted a more merciful death by jumping. His strong hands had been shaking when he'd begun tending her. She'd never seen someone so filled with fury behave so gently. He'd sponged the wine from her, cleansed and bandaged her wounds, all the while resolutely ignoring her state of undress.

It seemed the stronger his emotions, the more rigidly he controlled himself. That was a hypothesis she was curious to examine further. But why the fury? she wondered. Because someone had dared to trespass on his property? Messed up his home? A woman inclined to romanticizing things might have read some emotion for her into it, but Chloe wasn't going to be that fool.

With a soft sigh, she opened her eyes slowly to find him staring straight at her. He didn't speak, just looked at her. In the shadows, his chiseled face was breathtaking, savagely masculine.

His eyes.

She got lost in them for a long moment, wondering how she could have ever thought them tiger-gold. They were the color of dark whisky. And filled with some emotion. She stared. Something like...

Despair?

Deep beneath the coolness and mockery, well hidden beneath the relentless seduction, was it possible that Dageus MacKeltar hurt?

Don't read into things, she reminded herself. Face value says the man looks like he wants to kiss you, not give you his babies, Zanders.

God, he'd make beautiful babies though, a primordial, feminine part of her purred. That part of her that still bore the biological imprint from cavewoman days, and was drawn unerringly to the most able warrior and protector.

His eyes glittering, he bent his dark head to hers. *Oh, he definitely wanted to kiss her.* She knew she should turn away, called herself a fool in every language she knew, but it didn't help. The lights were down, most of the passengers were sleeping, the atmosphere was cozy and intimate, and she wanted to be kissed. What harm was there in a little kiss? Besides, they were on a plane, for heaven's sake—how far could it go?

Had she known the answer to that in advance, she would have scrambled across the aisle and sealed tape over her mouth. Duct tape. Several layers. Maybe taped her thighs together for good measure.

The moment his lips touched hers, a sultry storm whipped up inside her, and she sizzled with heat lightning. He rubbed his sensual lips over hers, taking it slow, making her feel needy and reckless.

Slow wasn't what she wanted. She'd allowed herself a kiss and, by God, she intended to have it. A real one, with all the trimmings. Lips and tongues and teeth and lots of soft sighs. With a little sound of impatience, she touched her tongue to his. His response was instant and electrifying, whipping her inner storm into a tempest of heat and desire. With a low growl deep in his throat, he fisted his hands in her hair, and yanked her head back against the seat, his tongue penetrating deep. She couldn't breathe around it.

The kiss he gave her was not meant to seduce, it was meant to mark a woman's soul, and it was working. Dominant like the man, hungry, demanding. Beckoning forth the secret Chloe that harbored hunger every bit as deep as his. He was a dark, seductive shadow, all around her, and she was drowning in him. In the spicy scent of leather-dad man, in the sleek wet glide of his tongue, the strong hands in her hair. And she dare not make all that sound that trembled inside her. It was unbearably erotic, being forced to take such a kiss in absolute silence.

His hot tongue thrust and withdrew in blatant mimicry of sex, and she felt herself getting hopelessly wet, just from his kiss. The man made a woman feel like she was being devoured, eaten up, lap by delicious lap.

When he stopped and traced the pad of his thumb over her swollen lips, she panted softly, staring, unable to say a word. He searched her face, dearly liking what he saw in her glazed eyes, the evidence of the mind-numbing effect his

kisses had on her. With a low, satisfied laugh, he pressed his thumb against her bottom teeth and forced her mouth open wide, damped his hands on the sides of her face, taking her in an open-mouthed, deep-tongued kiss. Stealing the breath from her lungs, then giving it back. Making love to her mouth, letting her know how he would make love to her in all kinds of other places.

When she was whimpering against his lips, he drew back, his gaze smoldering. Lifting her jean-dad legs, he pulled them across his own, positioning her so she leaned back against the window, giving him better access.

"If you wish me to stop, lass, say it now. I won't ask again."

Some other woman must have shaken her head "no," because Chloe *knew* she was supposed to say "yes."

And it certainly must have been some other woman who slipped her hands around the nape of his neck, beneath his soft black leather jacket and into his hair.

It was *definitely* some other woman who slid them hungrily down his rock-hard chest.

He caught them in one of his own and pushed them aside.

"Doona touch me, lass. No' now."

He shushed her protests by pushing one of his fingers between her lips. He touched her tongue, then traced the outline of her lips. Slowly, he trailed that damp finger down her neck, along the edge of her V-neck sweater, stopping in the valley between her breasts. She watched him, mesmerized. He was so incredibly beautiful, there in the shadows, his sensual lips parted, his eyes narrowed with desire. His breath was warm against the damp path he'd left, teasing nerve endings to fiery life.

When his dark gaze fixed on her breasts, her nipples puckered into hard peaks and her breasts felt swollen and heavy. God, the man was intoxicating! Even his gaze was potent, making her skin sizzle, making her frantic for more. The mere thought of his hot, wet mouth greedy on her nipples made her weak with desire.

With a glance so rife with sexual promise that it took her breath away, he tugged

the blanket from her waist, back up to her neck. Then he slipped his hands beneath the blanket, and Chloe's head dropped limply back against the window, her eyes fluttering closed.

She should stop him. And she would. Soon. Really soon.

"Open your eyes, lass. I want to see you watching me when I touch you." A soft command, but command nonetheless.

Her lids lifted languorously. She felt as if he was sucking the will out of her with his touch, leaving her limp and utterly vulnerable to his demands.

He slipped his hands beneath her sweater, impatiently unhooked her bra, and bared her breasts, palming them roughly. *Oh, yes*, she thought. This was what she'd been wanting since the moment she'd seen him. To be naked with him, to feel his hot, big hands branding her bare skin. She was melting into a puddle of soft, feminine heat in the hands of a master, and she couldn't gather the will to care. He cupped her breasts, kneading and plumping, tugging her nipples between his fingers. His breath hot against her skin, he ran the tip of his tongue up her neck, then glided his mouth over her chin, to her lips, taking her in a bruising kiss, fingers dosing on her nipples, pinching lightly. He continued the relentless barrage against her senses until she was helplessly arching her hips up from the seat.

Suddenly he broke the kiss, and pulled away, his eyes closed, his jaw tightly clenched. A breath hissed from between his gritted teeth. The sight of him fighting for self-control, the proof of the effect she had on him, sent a primitive, erotic thrill through her. The sight of him so aroused that he was in pain was beyond arousing. It had the same effect on her desire for him as gasoline splashed on an open flame.

She should stop him. She was helpless to stop him.

Then he opened his eyes, their gazes collided and she knew he knew exactly what she was feeling. Lost. On the edge. Hanging. In terrible need. He slanted his mouth over hers, sucking her tongue deep into his mouth.

A tiny convulsive spasm began to shiver inside her, and with it came the dim memory of where they were: On a plane, with nearly a hundred people around!

God, what if she came?

God, what if she screamed when she came?

"S-stop—" she panted against his lips.

"Too late, lass."

He cupped her intimately between her legs, through her jeans, pressing the heel of his palm hard against the vee between her thighs, and she nearly cried out from the exquisite pleasure of his touch *there*, where she was so empty and ached so desperately. His breathing harsh, he moved his hand in perfect rhythm, expertly finding her clitoris through the fabric of her jeans, using the bump of the inseam to create the perfect friction against it. Oh, the man knew how to touch a woman!

"Let go, lass. Give it to me *now*."

His husky growl pushed Chloe helplessly over the edge.

The noise that might have escaped her then, had he not crushed his mouth hard to hers, would have embarrassed her for perpetuity. Might have awakened the whole damned plane. She fancied it might have caused turbulence.

Her cries muffled, Chloe exploded. Helplessly, wantonly, lost, one of his big hands on her breasts, the other between her legs, she had a complete meltdown, shuddering against him, clamping her legs tight around his hand.

He took her cries with his tongue deep in her mouth, muting her, but for a tiny whimpering noise.

The pleasure was devastating, it crested and broke into a thousand shimmering pieces inside her. Her whole body shuddered and—had she been able to make a noise—she might well have done what she feared, and screamed.

But he took all that sound, his hot tongue devouring, thrusting deep, stealing her breath. He knew exactly how to touch her to keep the pleasure coming, his hand relentless between her legs, not letting up for a second and, as her first orgasm started to ease, it sort of stuttered and became a second one that sent her right back into a meltdown.

He kissed her while the aftershocks trembled through her, demanding kisses at first, tapering to soft, slow kisses as her tremors eased. She clung to him, unable to move. And though she'd just had a simply stupendous double climax, she ached, hot and wet. She'd been sated and yet-in no way sated—perhaps only finally, fully awakened. Irrevocably awakened. *Oh, God, what have I done? He's addictive!* They stayed like that for a long moment, forehead to forehead, both breathing unevenly. Then, with a lingering caress, he withdrew his hand.

He was motionless a few moments, then she heard a sharp intake of breath and a pained groan when he reached down and adjusted himself.

She fisted her hands and squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to think about that part of him he'd just touched. That part she'd caught a glimpse of when he'd dropped his towel, just enough to feed her insatiable curiosity.

No wonder Katherine had said she was dying without him.

There was no way she could let such a thing happen again. If she permitted even one more kiss today, she'd be in his bed. He was too sexy; she was already far too infatuated with him, and once in his bed, her defenses would come crashing down and she'd lose herself.

Why not just toss your heart out the airplane window, Zanders? a small inner voice snapped. *You'd have about as much promise of a safe landing.*

Dageus MacKeltar was more man than she could handle. She was a little-leaguer, clutching a ratty, secondhand mitt, trying to play ball with the pros. Just one good ground ball would knock her on her ass. And the game would move on without her.

Neither of them said a word, just sat in the dim shadows of the plane, trying to regain control.

Chloe was suddenly afraid that she might *never* get it back around him.

She was dozing again, and Dageus was paging through the third Book of Manannan.

Or trying to.

He was concentrating as well as any man in acute sexual agony could be expected to.

Not at all.

He kept seeing Chloe's flushed face: her lips swollen from his kisses, the skin around her mouth chafed from whisker burn, her eyes sleepy-sexy with desire as she reached her woman's peak and shuddered against him. Twice. Clung to him—as if she'd *needed* him. He'd held her heavy breasts in his hands. He'd touched her between her thighs.

He'd needed her so desperately that he'd nearly cast a Druid spell to fog the minds of the passengers, and pushed as far as she would go. Had contemplated taking her to the bathroom with him. Only her maiden state had stopped him. He'd not spill Chloe's virgin blood like some barbarian, in a two-by-two room with cardboard walls.

She'd have gone farther, had he pressed. Might have permitted his hand inside her trews, but had he gone that far, there would have been no stopping. So he'd kept his hand safely outside her trews and settled for releasing one of them.

He'd never felt such lust before. Though tooping took the edge off, it was wont to leave him strangely wanting. Touching Chloe made him think there might be some eventual satisfaction he'd never before achieved.

In the meantime, he was rock-hard and in pain.

Still, he brooded, he supposed it was a fair trade-off, for though he was in an agony of sexual need, their intimacy had mellowed the fury within him. Where earlier in the penthouse he'd been afraid of what he might do, her kisses had given him back a measure of control. Not much, but enough to work with.

In the past, he'd always needed to complete the sexual act to gain respite, but not with Chloe. Merely kissing her, touching her, bringing her pleasure had calmed him, had cleared his mind a bit. He made no pretense to understand the how or why of it. It had worked.

He would accept that—that Chloe would tie him in knots, but preserve some measure of his sanity. What a boon her kisses would be on Scottish soil.

Och, the woman had something he needed. His instincts had been right when they'd said "mine."

And that started a whole new train of possessive thoughts. Thoughts he could do naught about at the moment, so he took slow deep breaths and forced his thoughts to the pressing issues at hand.

What was to come anon would require all his wits and will. Once he was in Scotland, he knew the changes would speed up again. Changes he had to find a way to stop. And to do so, he had to face his brother. *Drustan, 'tis me, Dageus, and I'm sorry I lied, but I'm dark and I need to use the library.* Aye, that would go over well. *Drustan, I failed. I broke my oath and you should kill me.* Nay, not that, not yet. *Och, brother, help me.* Would he?

Bletherin' hell, you should have let him die! his da had shouted when, back in the sixteenth century, Dageus had summoned the courage to confide what he'd done. *How? How could I do that?* Dageus had shouted back. *In saving him you destroyed yourself! Now I've lost both my sons—one to the future, the other to the black arts!* No'yet, he'd protested.

But the look in his da's eyes... it had said he'd believed there was no hope. Horrified, Dageus had fled through the stones, determined to find a way to save himself.

And now he'd come full circle, back to asking his clan for aid. He hated it. He'd not asked for help, not once in his life. 'Twas not his way.

Exhaling sharply, he accepted the scotch he'd requested from the flight attendant, and downed it in a single swallow. As the heat exploded inside him, the tightness in his chest first intensified, then eased. What could he say? How to begin? With Gwen, mayhap? She could work her feminine miracles with his brother. God knew, she'd been a miracle for Drustan.

He pondered various ways to approach him, but it was more than he could stand thinking on, so he forced his attention back to the text, needing something tangible to work with.

An hour later, just before landing, he paused, hand poised above his notebook. He'd finally found something worthwhile. The only mention he'd yet discovered

about the fateful war that had occurred after the Tuatha Dé Danaan had left. Naught but a brief paragraph, it spoke of thirteen outcast Druids (so *that* was how many were inside him!) and of some heinous punishment they'd suffered. Though it did not elaborate further, beneath it was a notation that referred to *the fifth* Book of Manannan, as he'd suspected.

And if memory served him, the fifth volume was in the Keltar library.

Chloe mumbled softly in her sleep, drawing his gaze again. Reminding him that someone had tried to kill her—because of him.

He glanced at her bandaged hand and fierce protectiveness flooded him. He would let nothing harm her ever again.

He needed answers, and he needed them fast.

Chapter 11

For the second time in as many days, Chloe had the strange and immensely irritating experience of walking down a crowded street with Dageus MacKeltar. The first time had been in Manhattan yesterday, and the same thing had happened there.

Men got out of his way.

Not because he was impolite or barged rudely down the sidewalk. On the contrary, he moved with the sleek grace of a tiger. Sure-footed, perhaps a bit predatory. And men instinctively circumvented him, going out of their way to give him wide berth.

The women, now they were a different matter. They were the irritating part. They'd reacted the same way in New York, but yesterday it hadn't bothered her as much. They moved aside, but *barely*, as if unable to resist brushing up against him, their heads turning twice, three times. One woman had shamelessly pressed her breasts against his arm in passing. On several occasions, Chloe cast an indignant glance over her shoulder, only to catch several of them ogling his behind. She might be small but—blast it all—she wasn't *invisible*, walking along at his side, with his arm around her, his hand resting on her shoulder!

Not that he noticed the rubbernecking going on. He seemed oblivious to his effect on women. Probably so used to it that he no longer paid it any heed.

She longed for such oblivion, because watching so many women eye him hungrily was putting her in a bad mood. She cast more than a few pissed-off looks behind them.

The intense intimacy on the plane had stirred dangerously mushy feelings in her.

Face it, Zanders, you aren't the kind of girl who can be physically intimate with a man without getting emotionally involved. You're just not wired that way.

No kidding, she thought grumpily. She was having territorial feelings. Feelings she couldn't afford, for he'd certainly not evidenced any territorial feelings about her. Fortunately, as she watched women stare at him, irritation was making short

work of softer emotions. She savored the anger, preferring it to waffling in uncertain emotions. Anger was refreshingly tangible.

The moment they'd stepped off the plane in Inverness he'd grown cool again. Preoccupied. Businesslike. Collecting their luggage, striding briskly to the rental car agency. She'd had to repeat three times her request that he stop in Inverness for a coffee she desperately needed after traveling for fifteen hours. She wasn't about to meet his family in the throes of caffeine withdrawal.

After so thoroughly losing control of herself on the plane, his detachment hurt. He'd kissed her into a stupor, given her her first-ever climax, then withdrawn in every possible way. She should have known, she brooded. *What did you expect, Zanders? A declaration of intimacy just because you let him touch you intimately?*

Damn it, she *knew* better than that. The two did not necessarily go together where men were concerned.

When they entered Gilly's Coffee House, she stood beside him at the counter as he ordered, peeking at his profile. She wondered what he was thinking about, what had changed his mood so completely. The man ran hot and cold. *That's a good comparison*, she thought, *he'll either scald me or freeze me; either way it'll hurt.*

Well, she wasn't about to make the first move. If he wanted to go all reserved and professional, she could too. After all, he hadn't said "Come with me to Scotland and let's get to know each other." He'd said, "Come with me to Scotland to help me translate texts. Oh, and I'll try to seduce you too."

How many times had Katherine called him? Had all nine of those messages been from her? That thought jarred her thoroughly back to reality. She'd *hate* being that kind of woman. Pining after a man she couldn't have.

She folded her arms across her chest. Stared straight ahead at the menu behind the counter.

"I always want you, Chloe-lass," he murmured suddenly in a low voice, for her ears only. "There's no' a moment that I doona."

Chloe scowled. What was he—a mind reader? Damn him anyway! Arching a

brow, she tipped her head back, narrowed her eyes and gave him a chilly look. "Who said I was thinking anything even remotely like that? Do you just think I sit around with nothing better to do than think about you?"

"Nay, of course not. I merely thought to assure you that though my mind may seem far away, should you wish my attentions, you've only to say so."

"I'm fine. I just want some coffee."

"Mayhap you'd prefer to spend this eve with me at an inn, rather than going straight to my brother's," he suggested with a seductive smile.

Chloe scowl deepened.

"One eve is no' enough?" he teased, though his eyes were distant. "Greedy lass, would you be wishing a week?"

"Get over yourself, MacKeltar," she muttered. "Though the women out there"—she flung a hand toward the street—"seem to think so, I hate to break it to you, but the world does *not* revolve around you."

Dageus's nostrils flared and he inhaled sharply as he recognized her emotion. Jealousy. She'd been watching other women look at him (aye, he noticed, in a peripheral fashion) and it chafed her. That her desire for him was intense enough to make her feel jealousy, made him feel wildly possessive. His seduction was working. She was growing attached to him. Abruptly, he pulled her in front of him at the counter, and wrapped both arms around her waist. He held her while their order was filled, hungry for the feel of her wee body against his. She was stiff at first, but slowly the tension quit her small, lushly curved form.

When she leaned forward to take her latte and scone, he pressed against her from behind, deliberately brushing his hard arousal against her bottom, letting her know exactly how much she was always on his mind.

He smiled when she nearly dropped her coffee.

"I'd have bought you another," he said with a shrug, when she glanced sharply over her shoulder at him, blushing as furiously as she was scowling. Like as not, he'd buy her the cafe it she indicated the slightest desire for it.

"You're incorrigible," she hissed. "Just so you know, what happened on the plane is *not going* to happen again," she informed him, before turning and stalking off toward the rental car.

His eyes flared dangerously. Did the lass think to share such intimacies with him and then rescind them?

Och, nay, Dageus MacKeltar didn't go backward. She would find that out soon enough.

As they neared their destination, Dageus grew increasingly subdued. After lengthy deliberation, he'd decided it best to simply appear on Drustan's doorstep unannounced, hope Gwen answered the door, then hope for the best.

He glanced over at Chloe, acknowledging that he'd not have made this trip today alone. Even with her beside him, he'd considered turning around half a dozen times. Alone, he'd have tried the museums first, have put it off indefinitely, telling himself all manner of lies when the simple truth was that he didn't want to face Drustan. But somehow, with her at his side, it didn't seem nigh as impossible.

Her earlier irritation seemed to have passed or, as wee as she was, there simply wasn't enough room in her to contain irritation *and* excited curiosity. She was sipping her coffee, staring out the window, pointing, and asking endless questions. What was that ruin? When did summer begin? When did the heather bloom? Were there really pine martens, and could she see one? Could they be petted? Did they bite? Could they go to the museums while they were there? How about Glengarry? How much farther?

He'd been answering absently, but she was so enamored by the vista that she hadn't seemed to notice his inattention. He had no doubt that she would fall in love with his country. Her enthusiasm made him remember a time—what seemed a lifetime ago—when he, too, had viewed the world with wonder.

He forced his gaze away from her, and his thoughts back to the upcoming confrontation.

He hadn't seen Drustan—awake, that was—in four years, one month and twelve days. Since the eve that Drustan had been placed in an enchanted sleep, to

slumber for five centuries. They'd spent that final day together, trying to wedge a lifetime into it.

Twin brothers and best friends since they'd drawn breath, a mere three minutes apart, they'd said farewell that night. Forever. Drustan had gone to sleep in the tower, the tower that Dageus had to walk past a dozen times a day. At first, he'd bid his brother a sardonic "good morrow" each morn, but that had swift grown too painful.

Before Drustan had gone into the tower, they'd labored together over plans for a new castle that was to be Drustan and Gwen's home in the future. After Drustan had gone to sleep, Dageus had immersed himself in overseeing the construction of it, directing hundreds of workers, making certain all was perfect, working alongside the men.

And while so involved with the building of it, he'd become aware of an ever-growing, restless emptiness inside him.

The castle had begun to consume him. Impossible for a man to labor daily for three long years and not lose a part of himself to not merely the act of creating, but the creation. The empty, waiting rooms were the promise of family and love. The promise of a future he'd never been able to envision for himself.

When Drustan had died, he'd gone and stood outside the castle for hours uncounted, staring at its dark and silent silhouette in the gloaming.

He'd imagined Gwen in the future, waiting. And Drustan never arriving. She would live alone. Nell had told him Gwen was pregnant, though Gwen herself had not yet realized it, which meant Gwen would raise their babes alone.

He imagined no candles ever flickering beyond those windows. No children ever padding up and down those stairs.

All the empty places inside him had finally been filled—not with good things, but with anguish, fury, and defiance. He'd shaken his fist at the heavens, he'd raged and cursed. He'd questioned all he'd been raised to believe.

And by the misty, crimson-streaked dawn, he'd known but one thing: The castle he'd built *would* be filled with his brother and his family.

Aught else was simply unacceptable. And if the legends were true, if the cost was his own chance at life, he'd deemed it worthwhile. He'd little left to lose.

"Hey, are you okay?" Chloe asked.

Dageus started, realizing he must have been stopped at the stop sign for several minutes. He shook his head, scattering the grim memories. "Aye." He paused, weighing his next words. "Lass, I haven't seen Drustan in some time."

He had no idea how Drustan would react. He wondered if he would know, merely by looking at him, that he was dark. The bond of twins betwixt them was strong. *Aye, I used the stones, but the legends were wrong. There was no dark force in the in-between. I'm fine. 'Tis but that this century is a marvel and I've been exploring a wee. I'll come home anon.* 'Twas the lie he'd been telling his brother since the day he'd made the mistake of calling him, unable to resist hearing Drustan's voice, so he could assure himself that he was alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Dageus, you can tell me anything, Drustan had said.

There's naught to tell. 'Twas all a myth. Lie upon lie.

Then had begun the regular calls from Drustan, asking when he'd be home. He'd stopped picking up the phone months ago.

"So this is a reunion?"

"Of sorts." If Drustan turned him away, he'd take Chloe to the museums. He'd find another way. He was fair certain his brother wouldn't attack him. If he'd not come home, if he'd made Drustan hunt him, that might well have happened. But he hoped Drustan would understand his return for what it was: a request for aid.

She eyed him intently. He could feel her gaze, though he kept his profile to her.

"Did you and your brother have a falling out?" she said gently.

"Of sorts." He released the brake and resumed their journey, giving her a chilly look so she'd drop it.

A few moments later, she slipped her wee hand into his.

He tensed, startled by the gesture. He was accustomed to women reaching for many parts of him, none of them his hand.

He glanced at her, but she was staring straight ahead. Yet her hand was in his.

He closed his fingers around hers before she might snatch it away. Her wee hand was nearly swallowed by his. It meant more to him than kisses. More even than bedplay. When women sought him for sex, it was for their pleasure.

But Chloe's small hand had been given without taking.

Adam Black watched the automobile wind up the roads into the Keltar mountains. Though his queen had long ago passed an edict forbidding any Tuatha Dé Danaan to go within a thousand leagues of a Keltar, Adam had decided that since The Compact had been violated on the Keltar side, old edicts didn't apply.

He knew why she'd passed the edict. The Keltar, having pledged their lives and all their future generations to upholding The Compact, were to be free of any Tuatha Dé Danaan interference, because his queen had known, even then, that there were those among their race that didn't like The Compact. Who'd not wanted to leave the mortal realm. Who'd argued to conquer the human race. Who might have tried to goad a Keltar into breaking it.

So since the day The Compact had been sealed, not one Keltar had so much as glimpsed one of their ancient benefactors.

Adam suspected that might have been a mistake. For, although the Keltar had faithfully performed their duties, over four thousand years they'd forgotten their purpose. They no longer even believed in the Tuatha Dé Danaan, nor did they recall the details of the fateful battle that had set them on their course. Their ancient history had become nothing more than vague myths to them.

While on Yule, Beltane, Samhain, and Lughnassadh, the Keltar still enacted the rites that kept the walls solid between their worlds, they no longer recalled that such was the purpose of those rites. Perhaps one generation had neglected to pass down the oral tradition in full to the next. Perhaps the elder had died before he'd been able to impart all the secrets. Perhaps old texts had not been faithfully

recopied before time had disintegrated them, who knew? One thing Adam did know was that mortals ever seemed to forget their history. Those days that were so sacred to The Compact were now seen as feast days, little more.

He snorted, watching the car crest the hill. Humans couldn't even get their own religious history sorted out, from a mere two millennia past. It was no wonder that their history with his race had become so obscured by time's passage.

So, he thought, watching from his perch upon a high tor, *the darkest Druid has come home, bringing with him all the resurrected evil of the Draghar. Fascinating.* He wondered what his queen would make of it.

He had no plans to tell her.

After all, in Adam's opinion, it was her fault they'd been there to be resurrected in the first place.

Even now, she was ensconced with her council, where they were busy determining the mortal's fate.

Four thousand and some odd years ago, his people had withdrawn to their hidden places so that mortal and Fae would not destroy each other. Shortly thereafter, the Draghar, with their black arts, had nearly destroyed both their worlds.

His queen would *never* permit such a thing to happen.

He sighed. The mortal's time was finite.

Chapter 12

Gwen MacKeltar, former pre-eminent theoretical physicist, now wife and expectant mother, sighed dreamily, leaning back in the bathtub against her husband's hard chest. She was between his muscular thighs, with his strong arms around her, soaking in warm bubbly water and deliriously content.

Poor man, she thought, smiling. In her second trimester, she'd nearly punched him if he'd tried to touch her. Now, in her third, she was inclined to punch him if he *didn't* touch her. Frequently and exactly how she wanted. Her hormones were all over the place and the darned things just wouldn't function according to any equation she'd been able to compute.

But Drustan appeared to have forgiven her for the last few months, after the marathon sessions they'd been having. And not only didn't he seem to care that she was hopelessly fat, he'd happily devoted himself to finding new and unusual ways to make love that compensated for her physical changes. The tub was one of Gwen's favorites.

Hence, there she was at seven o'clock in the evening, with dozens of candles scattered about the bathroom, and her husband's strong arms around her, when the doorbell chimed downstairs.

Drustan dropped a kiss on the nape of her neck. "Are we expecting someone?" he asked, the small kiss turning into delicious nibbles.

"*Mmm*. Not that I know of."

Farley would get the door. Farley, properly christened Ian Llewelyn McFarley, was their butler and every time Gwen thought of him her heart went all soft. The man had to be eighty if a day, with bristly white hair and a tall, bowed frame. He lied about his age, and everything else, and she adored him.

What made her heart go *really* soft was that Drustan also had a tender spot for the old geezer. He had endless patience and invited his tall tales in the evening before a fire, as butler and laird shared a wee dram.

She knew that, regardless of how well her husband had adapted to her century,

part of him would always be a sixteenth-century feudal laird. When they'd first moved into their new home—instead of doing what a normal twenty-first century person would have done, and taken an ad out in the paper for staff or contacted an employment agency—Drustan had gone to Alborath and dropped word in the local grocery and barber shop.

Within two hours, Farley had appeared on their doorstep claiming to have "buddled in some of the finest homes in England" (the man had never been out of Scotland), and further claimed he could arrange the entire staffing of their castle.

They'd since been overrun by McFarleys. There were McFarleys in the kitchen, McFarleys in the stables, McFarleys doing the ironing and the laundry and the dusting. As near as Gwen had been able to count, they'd employed the man's entire clan of nine children (and spouses), fourteen grandchildren, and she suspected there were a few "greats" floating about.

And though it had soon become dear that none of them had any experience in their respective positions, Drustan had pronounced them all satisfactory because he'd heard in the village that positions were hard to find. In modern terms, the economy in Alborath was not good. Work *was* hard to find. And the feudal lord had surfaced, taking responsibility for the McFarleys. She adored that about her husband. A sharp knock at the bathroom door jarred her from her thoughts.

"Milord?" Farley inquired cautiously. Gwen giggled and Drustan sighed. Farley refused to address him by any other title, no matter how persistently Drustan corrected him.

"Mister MacKeltar," Drustan muttered. "Why is that so difficult for him?" He was determined to adopt twenty-first century customs. Unfortunately, Farley was just as determined to preserve the old ones and had decided that since Drustan was the apparent heir of the castle, he was a lord. Period, the end. "Aye?" Drustan replied more loudly. "Sorry to be disturbing you and the lady, but there's a man here to see you, and I ken'tis no' of my business, but I'm thinking I should have you know that he seems a bit the dangerous type, though he's polite enough as it is. Now the lass with him, och, in my opinion she's a sweet wee and proper lass, but him, well,'tis more of an air about him, you ken? I'm thinking you mightn't hold well with me saying so, being as he looks so much like you, though no' like you at all. *Ahem.*"

Farley cleared his throat, and Gwen felt Drustan go rigid behind her. She'd gone rather tense herself.

"Milord, he's saying he's your brother, but being as you've no" mentioned a brother, despite the resemblance..."

Gwen didn't hear another word because Drustan shot from the bath so fast that she got a thorough dunking and her ears were filled with water. By the time she surfaced, Drustan was gone.

Dageus had neglected to mention that his brother lived in a castle. *Sheesh*, Chloe thought, shaking her head, *I should have expected it*. Where else would such a man have come from? Old World, indeed.

It was an elegant castle, with a great stone wall and authentic barbican, with round turrets and square towers and probably a hundred rooms or more.

Chloe pivoted, trying to look everywhere at once. She'd not uttered a word since they'd entered the tree-canopied drive and begun their approach. She'd been too stunned. She was in Scotland, and they were going to be staying in a castle!

The interior of the great hall was enormous, with corridors shooting off in all directions. An intricately carved balustrade encircled the hall on the second floor, and an elegant double staircase swept down from opposing sides, met in the middle, and descended in one wide train of steps. A lovely stained-glass window was inset above the double entry doors. Brilliant tapestries adorned the walls, and the floors were scattered with rugs. There were two fireplaces in the hall, both tall enough for people to walk around in, bigger than the bathroom in her efficiency had been! Her fingers curled as she wondered how many artifacts she might get to examine.

"Do you like it, lass?" Dageus asked, watching her intently.

"It's magnificent! It's—it's—" she broke off, sputtering. "Oh, thank you," she exclaimed. "Do you have any idea how thrilling it is to me to be standing in an authentic medieval castle? I've *dreamed* of this moment."

He smiled faintly. "Aye, the castle is magnificent, isn't it?"

He couldn't have sounded more proud if he'd built it himself, Chloe thought.

"Did you grow up here?"

"Sort of."

"I could get tired of that answer in a hurry," she said, eyes narrowing. "I'm not exactly hard to talk to. You should try it." Since he'd told her that he and his brother had had some kind of falling out, she was better able to understand his withdrawn attitude. But if he thought it would keep her from asking questions, he was wrong.

"Ever the curious lass, aren't you?"

"If I waited for you to offer information, I'd never find out anything. Speaking of which, we need to talk about this curse-thing soon too. I can't help you if I don't know exactly what we're looking for."

Wariness flickered through his eyes. "Aye, I know. Anon, lass. For the now, let's see if I survive the wrath of my bro—"

He broke off abruptly, his gaze flying to the stairs.

Chloe's gaze followed, and she sucked in a sharp breath. A man who looked *exactly* like Dageus was standing there, halfway down the stairs, looking down at Dageus. She looked between them rapidly, disbelievingly.

"Oh, God, you're *twins*," she said faintly. Faintly, because the man at the top of the stairs wore only a towel around his waist.

"Stay right there!" the man on the stairs thundered. "I'll but get my trews. My apologies, lass. I had to see him with my own eyes." He turned around and loped up the stairs, three at a time.

Dageus mumbled something that sounded almost like, if *he drops his towel I'll kill him*, but Chloe decided she was imagining things.

The man skidded to a halt at the top and cast a sharp glance directly at Chloe. "Doona let him leave, lass," he roared at her.

"Wow," was all she could manage.

Beside her, she felt Dageus stiffen. For a moment, it seemed the hall grew

markedly cooler.

"The lasses have oft said I am more handsome," he said icily. "And a better lover."

Chloe blinked up at him.

"So doona be ogling him. He's married, lass."

"I wasn't ogling," she protested, knowing full well she'd been ogling. "And if I was, it's only because you didn't warn me that you were twins."

He gave her a dark look.

"Besides, he only had a towel on," she justified.

"I doona care if he had naught but his skin on. 'Tisn't polite to ogle another woman's husband."

Chloe caught her breath. His expression was furious and he looked... jealous. About her? For looking at his brother? She peered at him, hardly daring to credit it.

Abruptly, his gaze was gone again, fixed at the top of the stairs, and hers followed. She glanced from Drustan to Dageus and back again.

And she wondered how Dageus might have worried for even a moment that Drustan wouldn't welcome him home. The expression on his brother's face took her breath away. Love blazed in his eyes and, though she couldn't tell from this distance, it looked as if they glistened with tears.

"Drustan," Dageus said with a cool nod. Drustan's eyes dimmed and his mouth tightened. "Drustan?" Drustan snapped. "That's it? A mere Drustan? No 'Good morrow, brother,'tis sorry I am that I've been such an ass and no' come home'?" His voice was rising with each word and he began stalking down the stairs.

God, they even moved the same way, Chloe marveled, like great sinuous cats, all sleek strength and smoothly sculpted muscles. Though Drustan had pulled on "trews," he'd not bothered with a shirt and his hair was wet, dripping down his chest. The muscles in his glistening torso rippled with every movement. He must have been in the shower, she realized.

"...is that how you'll greet me?" Drustan was still talking, but she'd missed part of his verbal barrage, apparently temporarily deafened by visual overload. "Get over here and greet me properly," he thundered.

Chloe tore her gaze away from Drustan and looked at Dageus. And stared. Though he looked as remote and impassive as ever, his eyes positively burned with emotion. He was as still as one of the many standing stones they'd passed, seeming every bit as ancient and obdurate. If one didn't notice the hands fisted at his sides. And those eyes.

Oh, there was more to Dageus MacKeltar than he let on! And her hypothesis was right. When he felt most deeply was when he exhibited the greatest reserve.

So *that* was how such a man wore love, she realized. Quietly. Not an expressive man. Not a man to laugh or cry or dance. A man who had hair to his waist, but never wore it down. Did he ever let himself go?

I'll bet he does in bed. She was utterly rattled by the thought of all that disciplined muscle coming undone in bed. God, she could just taste it...

She shivered, studying the two men.

They were twins, but they weren't completely identical, she realized. There were minute differences. Drustan's hair wasn't as long, a bit past his shoulders, his eyes silvery. Taller, and he probably weighed more. Drustan was packed with muscle, Dageus's body was leaner, more ripped. Same beautiful, chiseled features though. Even the same dark shadow beard on similar jaws. She peered intently. Dageus's mouth was more... full and sulky. The mouth of a born seducer.

She was so engrossed that she didn't even notice the woman's approach until she spoke softly.

"Gorgeous, aren't they?"

Chloe turned, startled. The woman who'd spoken was as short as she was, and extremely pregnant, with silvery-blond hair and wispy fringed bangs. Her hair was twisted up in a knot and slightly damp, and Chloe blushed a little, realizing they'd obviously *both* been in the shower, and she found it highly doubtful that they'd been in separate ones. She was beautiful, glowing with the unique

radiance of a pregnant woman who was utterly thrilled by impending motherhood, or... the radiance of a woman who'd just been treated to a MacKeltar's special seductive talents in the shower, Chloe thought wistfully. The mere thought of taking a shower with Dageus made Chloe feel rather glowy herself.

"Very. I had no idea they were twins. Dageus didn't tell me."

"Drustan didn't tell me either. He regretted that later, when I kissed Dageus because I thought he was Drustan. Drustan didn't care for it one bit. They're possessive about their women, but I'm sure you know that. I'm Gwen, by the way, Drustan's wife."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you. I'm Chloe Zanders." Chloe nibbled her lip uncertainly, then felt it necessary to clarify, "But I'm not his... er, woman. We met only recently and I'm just here to help him with translations."

Gwen looked highly amused. "If you say so. How did the two of you meet?"

If you say so? Now just what did that mean? And how to answer the question about how they'd met? Chloe opened her mouth and shut it again. Surely not, *I snooped through his penthouse and he tied me to his bed. And then I started turning into a person I hardly recognize anymore.* "That's a long story," she said warily.

"Those are the best kind—I can't wait to hear it! I have a few of my own." Gwen looped her arm through Chloe's and steered her toward the staircase. "Farley," she called over her shoulder to the white-haired butler, "would you have tea and coffee sent up to the solar? And some snacks. I'm *starving*."

"Right away, milady." With a doting look at Gwen, the butler rushed off.

"Why don't we get to know each other while they catch up?" Gwen asked, turning back to Chloe. "They've not seen each other in quite some time."

Chloe glanced again at Dageus. He and Drustan were still standing in the middle of the great hall, talking intently. Just then, as if he felt her gaze on him, Dageus looked at her, tensed, and started to walk toward her.

Surprised by his concern for her at what was dearly a difficult moment for him,

Chloe shook her head, assuring him wordlessly that she was fine.

After a moment's hesitation, he turned back to Drustan.

Chloe smiled at Gwen. "I'd like that."

Chapter 13

When the lasses hastened off to the solar, Drustan and Dageus adjourned to the privacy of the library. A spacious, masculine room with cherry bookcases recessed into paneled walls, comfortable chairs and ottomans, a dusky-rose marble fireplace and tall, bay windows, the library was Drustan's retreat, much as the glass-faced solar that overlooked the gardens was Gwen's.

Drustan couldn't take his eyes off his twin brother. He'd nigh given up hope that Dageus would come home. He'd been dreading what he might have to do if his brother didn't. But he was here now, and the tight fist that had been clutched around his heart since the day he'd read and, in a fit of fury, burned the letter their da had left him, finally, blessedly, eased a bit.

Dageus tossed himself into a chair near the fireplace, stretched out his legs, and propped his feet on a stool.

"What think you of the castle, Drustan? It appears to have withstood the centuries well."

Aye, that it had. The castle had surpassed all of Drustan's expectations. If ever a man had received proof of his brother's love, it had been in the gift of their home. Then Dageus had topped even that gift by sacrificing himself to ensure Drustan would survive to live in it. But Dageus had always been like that: though not a man to whom soft words came readily, when he loved, he loved to a dangerous point. 'Tis *both his greatest strength and weakness*, Silvan had oft remarked, and truer words had never been uttered. He had the wild, true heart of a child, in the body of a jaded man. Intensely guarded, unless he chose to give it, yet once given, it was given completely. Without thought to his own survival.

"Tis even more magnificent than I'd imagined when we worked on the plans," Drustan said. "I can't thank you enough, Dageus. Not for this. Not for anything." How did one thank a brother for sacrificing his soul for one's own happiness? *My life for yours*, his brother had chosen. Thanks weren't possible.

Dageus shrugged. "You drew the sketches." *Ah, so he will pretend I meant only the castle and evade deeper issues*, Drustan thought. "You built it. Gwen loves it too. And we've nigh finished having electricity and plumbing installed."

There was so much they needed to talk about, and naught of it would be easy to address. After a moment's hesitation, Drustan decided to confront it directly, for he suspected Dageus would talk circles around it.

Crossing to the liquor cabinet, Drustan splashed Macallan into two glasses, and handed one to Dageus. Thirty-five-year-old single-malt scotch, only the finest for his brother's return. "So, how bad is it?" he asked matter-of-factly.

Dageus flinched, a small, hastily contained reaction, but there. Then he tossed back the drink in one swallow and handed him the glass for a refill. Drustan complied, waiting.

His brother sipped more slowly at the second one. "Worse now that I'm back on Scottish soil," he said finally.

"When did your eyes change?" It wasn't only his eyes that had changed, Dageus moved differently. His most minute gestures were carefully executed, as if he could contain what was in him only by constant vigilance.

A tiny muscle leapt in Dageus's jaw. "How dark are they?"

"They're not gold anymore. A strange color, nigh like your drink."

"They change when it starts to get bad. When I've used too much magic."

"What are you using magic for?" Drustan asked carefully.

Dageus tossed back the rest of his drink, rose, and went to stand before the fire. "I was using it to obtain the texts I needed to see if there was a way to... get rid of them."

"What is it like?"

Dageus rubbed his jaw, exhaling. "'Tis as if I have a beast inside me, Drustan. 'Tis pure power and I find myself using it without even thinking. When did you know?" he asked, with a faint, bitter smile.

Cold eyes, Drustan thought. They hadn't always been cold. Once they'd been warm, sunny-gold, and full of easy laughter. "I've known since the first, brother."

A long silence. Then Dageus snorted and shook his head.

"You should have let me die, Dageus," Drustan said softly. "*Damn* you for not letting me die."

Thank you for not letting me die, he added silently, torn by emotion. It was a terrible mixture of grief and guilt and gratefulness. If not for his brother's sacrifice, he would never have seen his wife again. Gwen would have raised their babies in the twenty-first century, alone. The day he'd read Silvan's letter, and discovered the price his twin had paid to ensure his future, he'd nearly gone crazy, hating him for giving up his own life, loving him for doing it.

"Nay," Dageus said. "I should have watched over you more carefully and kept the fire from happening."

" 'Twas not your fault—"

"Och, aye, it was. Do you know where I was that eve? I was down in the lowlands in the bed of a lass whose name I can't even recall—" He broke off abruptly. "*How* did you know? Did Da warn you?"

"Aye. He left a letter for us explaining what had happened, advising that you'd disappeared. Our descendant, Christopher, and his wife, Maggie—whom you'll meet anon—gave it to me shortly after I'd awakened. You called not long after that."

"Yet you pretended to accept my lies. Why?" Drustan shrugged. "Christopher went to Manhattan twice and watched you. You were doing naught I felt needed to be stopped."

His reasons for not going to America to retrieve his brother were complicated. Not only had he been loath to leave Gwen's side while she was pregnant, he'd been wary of forcing a confrontation. After talking with him on the phone, he'd known that Dageus was indeed dark, but was holding on somehow. He'd suspected that were Dageus a tenth as powerful as Silvan believed, trying to force Dageus to return would have accomplished naught. Had it come to force, one of them would have died. Now that Dageus was there in the room with him, Drustan knew'twould have been himself who'd died. The power in Dageus was immense, and he wondered how he'd withstood it this long.

Cautiously, when Dageus turned his back to him and busied himself opening a

new bottle of whisky, Drustan reached out with his Druid senses, curious to know more about what they were dealing with.

He nearly doubled over. The whisky he'd sipped, curdled in his gut and tried to daw its way back up.

He retracted instantly, frantically, violently. By Amergin, how did Dageus stand it? A monstrous, icy, rapacious beast pulsed beneath his skin, snaking through him, coiled, but barely. It had a fierce, gluttonous appetite. It was huge and twisted and suffocating. How could he *breathe*?

Dageus turned, one brow arched, his gaze icy. "Never do that again," he warned softly. Without bothering to ask, he poured Drustan a refill.

Drustan snatched it from his hand and tossed it back swiftly. Only after the heat of it had exploded in his chest, did he trust himself to speak. He'd not kept his senses open long enough to explore the thing. His throat constricted by whisky and shock, he said hoarsely, "How did you know I was doing it? I scarce even —"

"I felt you. So did they. You doona want them to. Leave them alone."

"Aye," Drustan rasped. He hadn't needed the warning; he had no intention of opening his senses around his brother again. "Are they different personalities, Dageus?" he forced out.

"Nay. They have no separateness, no voice." *As yet*, Dageus thought darkly. He suspected the day might well come when they found a voice. The moment Drustan had reached out, they'd stirred, sensing power, and for a moment he'd had the terrible suspicion that what was in him could drain Drustan, suck him dry somehow. "So, it's not as if you can actually hear them?"

" 'Tis—och, how can I explain this?" Dageus fell silent a moment, then said, "I feel them inside me, their knowledge as my own, their hunger as my own. It intensifies my desire for even simple things such as food and drink, to say nothing of women. There's a constant temptation to use magic and the more I use it, the colder I feel. The colder I feel, the more reasonable it seems to use it, and the stronger my desires become. I suspect there's a line that, should I cross, I will no longer be myself. This thing inside me will take over. I doona know what

would happen to me then. I think I would be gone."

Drustan inhaled sharply. He could see a man being devoured by such a thing.

"My thought patterns change. They become primitive. Naught matters but what I want."

"But you've controlled it this long." *How?* Drustan marveled. *How did a man survive with such a thing in him?* "'Tis more difficult here. 'Tis why I left in the first place. What did Da tell you to do, Drustan?"

"He told me to save you. And we will." He deliberately omitted the last line of their father's letter. *And if you cannot save him, you must kill him.* Now he knew why.

Dageus searched his gaze intently, as if not convinced that was the entirety of what Silvan had said. Drustan knew he was about to push, so he launched an offensive of his own.

"What of the lass you brought? How much does she know?" Though he was amazed that Dageus could still feel anything at all with *that* inside him, he'd not missed the possessiveness in Dageus's gaze, or the reluctance with which he'd left her in Gwen's care.

"Chloe knows me as naught more than a man."

"She doesn't feel it in you?" *Lucky lass*, Drustan thought.

"She senses something. She watches me strangely at times, as if perplexed."

"And how long do you think you'll be able to maintain the pretense?"

"Christ, Drustan, give a man a moment to catch his breath, will you?"

"Do you plan to tell her?"

"How?" Dageus asked flatly. "Och, lass, I'm a Druid from the sixteenth century and I broke an oath and now I'm possessed by the souls of four-thousand-year-old evil Druids and if I doona find a way to get rid of them I will turn into a scourge upon the earth and the only thing that keeps me sane is tooping?"

"What?" Drustan blinked. "What was that about tooping?"

"It makes the darkness ease. When I begin to feel cold and detached, for some reason bedding a wench makes me feel human again. Naught else seems to work."

"Ah, that's why you brought her."

Dageus gave him a dark look. "She resists."

Drustan choked on a swallow of whisky. Dageus needed tooping to keep that heinous beast at bay, yet he'd brought a woman with him who refused his bed? "Why haven't you seduced her?" he exclaimed.

"I'm working on it," Dageus snarled.

Drustan gaped at him. Dageus could seduce any woman. If not gently, then with a rough, wild wooing that never failed. He'd not missed the way the wee lass had looked at his brother. She needed no more than a firm nudge. So why the bletherin' hell hadn't Dageus nudged? A sudden thought occurred to him. "By Amergin, she's the one, isn't she?" he breathed.

"What one?" Dageus stalked to a tall window, pushed the drapes aside and stared out at the night. He slid the window up and breathed deeply, greedily, of sweet, chilly Highland air.

"The moment I saw Gwen, a part of me simply said 'mine.' And from that moment, though I didn't understand it, I knew that I would do aught ever it took to keep her. 'Tis as if the Druid in us recognizes our mate instantly, the one we could exchange the binding vows with. Is Chloe that one?"

Dageus's head whipped around and the unguarded, startled look on his face was answer enough for Drustan. His brother had heard the same voice. Drustan suddenly felt a surge of hope, despite what he'd felt inside his brother. He knew from personal experience that oft love could accomplish miracles when all else seemed destined to fail. Dageus may be dark, but by some miracle, he wasn't lost to it yet.

And when one was dealing with evil, Drustan suspected love might be the most potent weapon of all.

When Gwen joined them in the library a short time later, without Chloe, Dageus tensed. He'd yet to speak to Drustan about the attempt on Chloe's life, and about the Draghar—whoever they were.

Is she the one? Drustan had asked.

Och, aye, she was the one for him. Now that Drustan had remarked upon it, Dageus understood it was what he'd sensed from the very first—the kind a man kept, indeed. 'Twas no wonder he'd refused to use a memory spell on her, and send her on her way. He was incapable of letting her go. 'Twas also no wonder he'd not been satisfied with merely trying to bed her.

In this, his darkest hour, fate had gifted him with his mate. The irony of it was rich. How was a man to woo a woman under such conditions? He knew naught of wooing. He knew only of seduction, of conquering. Tenderness of the heart, soft words and pledges, had been burned out of him long ago. The youngest son of no noble consequence, pagan to boot, he'd caught too many of his youthful follies attempting to seduce his own brother.

One too many of them had coyly suggested a three-way bout of love-play—and *no'* with another woman. Nay, always with his own twin.

Four times he'd watched Drustan try to secure a wife—and fail.

He'd learned young and learned well that he possessed one thing a woman wanted, hence he'd perfected his skills and taken comfort from the knowledge that while women might eschew intimacy with him, they never turned him away from their beds. He was always welcome there. Even when their husband was in the next room, a fact that had only deepened his cynicism involving so-called matters of the heart.

Except Chloe. She was the one woman he'd tried to seduce that had refused him.

Yet remained at his side.

Aye, but how long will she remain there when she discovers what you are?

He had no answer for that, only a relentless determination to have all of her that he could. And if that determination was more akin to the desperation of a drowning man than a courageous one, so be it. The night he'd tempted death and

danced on the slippery terrace wall above the snow-covered city of Manhattan—and fallen on the safe side—he'd made a promise to himself: that he would not yield to despair again. He would fight it any way he could, with any weapon he could find, till the bitter end.

"Where is she?" he hissed, surging to his feet.

Gwen blinked. "It's wonderful to see you, too, Dageus," she said sweetly. "Nice of you to drop in. We've only been waiting forever." "*Where?*"

"Relax. She's upstairs taking a long shower. The poor girl traveled for an entire day and, though she said she slept a bit on the plane, she's clearly exhausted. What on earth have you been doing to her? I adore her, by the way," Gwen added, smiling. "She's a brainy geek like me. Now, can I have a hug?"

His tension ebbed slowly, aided by the knowledge that if Chloe was safe anywhere, it was within these walls. He'd personally chiseled the protection spells into the cornerstones when the castle had been built. So long as she remained within them, no harm would find her.

He skirted the sofa and opened his arms to Gwen, the woman who'd once saved his life. The woman he'd pledged his own to protect. " 'Tis good to see you again, lass, and you're looking lovely as ever." He bent his head to kiss her.

"No lips," Drustan warned. "Unless you wish me to be kissing Chloe."

Dageus averted his face swiftly. "How are the wee bairn, lass?" he asked, with a glance at her rounded belly. Gwen beamed and prattled on about her most recent doctor's visit. When she paused finally for a breath, she peered at him intently. "Has Drustan told you our idea yet?"

Dageus shook his head. He was still having a hard time fathoming that Drustan had known he was dark all this time. A hard time believing he was home, that his brother had welcomed him. Had, in fact, been waiting for him.

"You're my brother," Drustan said quietly, and Dageus knew that he'd read his feelings in that uncanny way his twin had. "I would never turn my back on you. It wounds me that you thought I would."

"I but thought to fix it myself, Drustan."

"You hate to ask for help. You always have. You've ever shouldered more than your share of the burden. You had no right to sacrifice yourself for me—"

"Doona even start with me—"

"I didn't ask you to—"

"Och, you rather be *dead*!"

"Enough!" Gwen snapped. "Stop it, both of you. We could sit here for hours arguing about who should or should not have done what. And what would that accomplish? Nothing. We have a problem. We'll fix it."

Dageus hooked a ladder-back chair with his foot, turned it about and dropped into it backward, stretching his legs around the frame, resting his forearms on the top of the back. He took a perverse pleasure in seeing his elder brother chastened. Drustan was well met by his wee, brilliant wife. The bond betwixt them was a precious thing.

"We've given this a lot of thought," Gwen said, "and we think we can send someone back to warn you before the tower burns, that it's going to burn. That way you can prevent the fire, which would save Drustan, and keep you from ever turning dark."

Dageus shook his head. "Nay, lass. It wouldn't work."

"What mean you? 'Tis a brilliant solution," Drustan protested.

"Not only doona we have someone we could send, because that person might be forever stuck in the past, but I doona believe it would change me now."

"No, Drustan and I thought of that," Gwen insisted. "If the person was one you met as a result of turning dark, like—oh, say, gee, Chloe—the same thing that happened to me should happen to her. She'd be sent back to her own time the moment she succeeded in changing your future."

"Chloe goes nowhere without me. And she doesn't know. You didn't tell her, did you?" The tension was back again. He'd been so caught up in seeing his brother again, so relieved to be accepted, that he'd forgotten to warn Gwen to say naught to Chloe of his plight.

"I didn't say anything," Gwen hastened to assure him. "It was apparent she knew very little, so I kept the conversation light. We talked about college and jobs mostly. Who else have you met in this century that we might send?"

"No one. It wouldn't work anyway. There are things you doona know."

"Such as?" Drustan probed.

"I'm no' the same man anymore. I suspect that even if someone went back and warned the past me, and the past me didn't break his oath, what I've become would still exist in the here and now."

"That's impossible," Gwen declared, with the firm conviction of a physicist having weighted her proofs both valid and true.

"Nay'tis not. I tried something very similar. Shortly after I broke my oath, I went back to a time before the fire, hoping to cancel myself out. To see if the past me might cause the dark me to cease to exist."

"The way things occurred when I took Gwen back into the past," Drustan said thoughtfully. "The future me ceased to exist because two identical selves couldn't coexist in the same moment in time."

"Aye. I even managed to carry a note to myself through the stones, so the past me would know to move you from the tower. But the canceling hinges on two *identical* selves."

"What are you saying?" Drustan demanded, hands clenching on the arms of his chair.

"When I went back, not only didn't the future me cease to exist, *neither* me did. I watched myself through a window for hours before fleeing again. He never disappeared. I might have strolled in and introduced myself."

" 'Tis wise you didn't. We must be ever wary of creating paradoxes," Drustan said uneasily.

Gwen gaped. "That's not possible. According to the laws of physics, one of you would *have* to cease to exist"

"You'd think after all she experienced with me, she wouldn't be so hasty labeling

things possible or impossible," Drustan said dryly.

"How could it be possible?" Gwen demanded.

"Because I am no longer the same man I was. I'm different enough now with these ancient beings inside me, on some elemental level, that my past self did not conflict with who or what I've become."

"Oh, God," Gwen breathed. "So even if we sent someone back, and they changed the past..."

"I doubt it would have any effect on me at all. What I am now, seems to exist beyond the natural order of things. 'Tis possible it may cause some negative effect we can't even imagine. There's too much we doona understand here. I fear creating multiple moments in time for no good purpose. Nay, my only hope is the old lore."

Drustan and Gwen exchanged an uneasy look.

" 'Twas a clever idea," Dageus reassured them. "I can see why you considered it. But I've given this matter endless thought and my only hope is to discover how they were imprisoned in the first place, and reimprison them. 'Tis why I came. I need to use the Keltar library. I need to examine the ancient texts that deal with the Tuatha Dé Danaan."

Drustan sighed gustily and raked a hand through his hair.

"What?" Dageus's eyes narrowed.

"It's just that we were so certain our idea would work," Gwen said miserably.

"And?" Dageus pressed warily.

Drustan rose and began pacing. "Dageus, we no longer have those texts," he said in a low voice.

Dageus lunged to his feet so swiftly that the chair clattered to the floor. Nay—it couldn't be so! "What? What say you? How can we not have them?" he thundered.

"We doona know. But they're not here. After reading Da's letter, I decided to

research the Tuatha Dé Danaan to discover aught I could about the mythic race, in hopes of discovering a way to cast them out. That's when Christopher and I found that we're missing a great many tomes."

"But surely *some* of the volumes I need are here." He began naming the ones he was specifically seeking, but at each tide, Drustan shook his head.

"That's inconceivable, Drustan!"

"Aye, and it nigh seems deliberate. Christopher and I suspect someone intentionally removed them, though we cannot discern how it might have been done."

"I need those texts, damn it!" He slammed his fist against the paneled wall.

There was a moment of silence, then Drustan said slowly, "There is a place—or should I say a time—they can be found. A time both you and I know our clan's library was fully extant."

Dageus smiled bitterly. Right. And just how was he going to explain *that* to Chloe? *Ahem, lass, the tomes I needed aren't here, so we're going to have to go back in time and get them?* He snorted. Would nothing be simple? It seemed she'd be learning more about him, whether he was ready to tell her or not.

"I could go for you," Drustan offered. "Just long enough to get what we need."

"Then I'm going too," Gwen said instantly.

"Nay!" Drustan and Dageus both snapped at the same time.

Gwen glared. "I will not be left behind."

"*Neither* of you will be going." Dageus halted that argument before it built steam. "We have no guarantee that the Tuatha Dé Danaan didn't plant other dangers in the in-between. Any Keltar who opens a bridge for personal reasons is at risk. No Keltar but I will be opening any bridges to another time. I'm already dark. Besides, what one brings into the stones at one end doesn't always show up on the other end. I lost several heirlooms when I came through last time."

Gwen nodded slowly. "That's true. I lost my backpack. It went spiraling off into

the quantum foam somewhere. We can't risk trying to bring the books through."

"Can you open the stones safely? What will the use of magic do to you?" Drustan asked cautiously. To Gwen, who hadn't been privy to their earlier conversation, he explained, "When he uses magic, it makes the... er, ancient ones stronger."

"Then maybe you shouldn't go," Gwen worried.

Dageus exhaled dismally. All his hopes were pinned on those Keltar texts, and he'd wasted as much time as he dare. "If what you say is true, and the tomes aren't here, I doona have a choice. As for the magic, I'm more concerned about what Da might do to me. I'll deal with the darkness somehow."

"We're clan, Dageus," Drustan said softly. "Da would never turn his back on you. And the timing couldn't be more fortuitous. The spring equinox is but a few days hence—"

" 'Tis no' necessary," Dageus cut him off. "I can open the stones any day, at any hour."

"What?" Drustan and Gwen exclaimed together. " 'Twould seem our esteemed benefactors withheld significant portions of knowledge from us. The stones can be opened any time. It but requires a different set of formulas."

"And you know these formulas?" Drustan pressed. "Aye. Because those within me do. Their knowledge is mine."

"Why would such knowledge have been withheld from us?"

"I suspect they intended it as a deterrent to keep a Keltar from opening a bridge through time rashly. One might entertain the notion—say, if one's brother died—to go through the stones that very day and undo it. But if one was forced to wait until the next solstice or equinox, one might have endured the worst of the grief by that time, and decide against it." Dageus's voice dripped self-mockery.

"How long did you wait?" Drustan asked quietly.

"Three moons, four days and eleven hours."

No one said anything for a time after that. Finally, Gwen shook herself, and rose.

"While you two discuss this, I'll go prepare a room for Chloe."

"She sleeps with me," Dageus said in a low growl.

"She said you weren't sleeping together," Gwen said evenly.

"Christ, Gwen, what did you do? *Ask* her?"

"Of course I did," Gwen replied, as if she couldn't believe he'd even ask such a silly question. "But aside from admitting that much, she wasn't exactly forthcoming. So, what is she to you?"

"His mate," Drustan said softly.

"Really?" Gwen beamed. "Oh!" She dapped her hands delightedly. "I'm so happy for you, Dageus!"

Dageus pinned her with a forbidding stare. "Och, lass, are you witless? 'Tis no' a time for celebration. Chloe doesn't ken what I am and—"

"Don't underestimate her, Dageus. We women are not as fragile as you men like to believe."

"Then put her in my room," he said evenly.

"No," Gwen said just as evenly.

"You will put her in my room."

Gwen tipped her chin up and fisted her hands at her waist, staring him down. For a moment, Dageus was reminded of Chloe brandishing one of his own blades at him, and wondered how such wee women could be so unafraid of men such as he and his brother. Remarkable, but they were.

"No, I won't, Mr. Big Bad and Dark," she said. "You don't scare me. And you're not bullying me, or her, into anything we don't want."

"You shouldn't just go about asking people if they're sleeping with each other," he hissed.

"How else was I going to know where to put her?"

"By asking *me*." He glowered but she showed no signs of budging, so he turned to Drustan for support.

Drustan shrugged. "My wife is lady of the castle. Doona be looking to me."

"She's safe here, Dageus," Gwen said gently. "I'll put the two of you across the hall from each other. She can share your room if she *chooses* to."

As Gwen slipped from the library, she cast a last glance over her shoulder at the two magnificent Highlanders. She was both elated and deeply troubled, elated that Dageus had come home, troubled by what was yet to come. She and Drustan had been so certain their idea would work, they'd not thought beyond it.

Now Dageus was going to have to go back into the past. Open a bridge through time and search the old lore. She didn't want to let him go, and knew Drustan didn't either. But there wasn't much choice. She intended to try to cajole him into waiting a few days, but harbored little hope on that score.

Even without the benefit of her husband's Druid senses, she could feel that Dageus was different. There was something violent in him. Something barely contained, on the verge of exploding.

She arched a brow, thinking that, though she would *never* tell her husband so, Dageus was even sexier dark than he'd been before. He was raw and primal and something about him made a woman's every nerve stand up on end.

Her thoughts went to the woman upstairs. If Chloe had any sense at all, she mused, she'd be sharing his room tonight, and for however many future nights they might have.

Not only was refusing a Keltar male's bed a difficult thing to do, but it was a criminal waste of a woman's time, in Gwen's opinion. Drustan was an extraordinary lover, and with all that raw sexual heat Dageus was giving off, she had no doubt he would be too.

Long ago, in another century, she'd watched Dageus sit on the front steps of the MacKeltar castle in the gloaming, staring at the night sky. She'd recognized his loneliness—she'd been lonely once too—and had made a vow to help find him a mate. It seemed he'd found her himself. The least she could do was help him win her. The debt she owed Dageus MacKeltar was enormous.

She tucked her bangs behind her ear, smiling faintly.

She would have to let slip a few comments to Chloe about Keltar expertise and stamina. As well as imparting a few other bits of hard-earned wisdom when the time was right.

Hours later, Dageus followed Drustan abovestairs. They'd talked long into the night and soon it would be dawn.

After Gwen had left, he'd told Drustan about the attack on Chloe's life, and the words her strange assailant had said, then filled him in on the few references he'd found about the Draghar. Unfortunately, Drustan had been as baffled as he. They'd bandied about possibilities, but Dageus was getting blethering weary of possibilities. He needed answers.

"When will you be leaving?" Drustan said, as they reached the end of the north corridor and prepared to part for their respective chambers.

Dageus looked at Drustan, savoring the sight of his brother alive, awake, and happy. Though he'd like to spend more time with Drustan and Gwen, now that he was on Scottish soil again, he couldn't afford further delays. Chloe was in danger, and his time was growing short. He could feel it. He suffered no doubt that another attack would come, and didn't know if the Draghar, whoever they were, could follow them through time. If they were part of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, they could follow them anywhere.

"On the morrow."

"Must you go so soon?"

"Aye. I doona ken how much time I have."

"And the lass?" Drustan asked carefully.

Dageus's smile was icy. "She goes where I go."

"Dageus—"

"Say no more. If she doesn't go, I doona go."

"I would protect her for you."

"She goes where I go."

"And if she doesn't wish to?"

"She will."

Chapter 14

" 'Tis time, Chloe-lass," Dageus said.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Chloe asked warily. "Time for what?"

"It occurs to me that mayhap I've no' made my intentions clear," Dageus said with soft menace, stalking toward her.

"What intentions?" Though Chloe was determined to hold her ground, her cowardly feet had other plans. Traitorous little ninnies, they took a step backward for each step he took forward.

"My intentions about you."

"Oh, yes, you have," Chloe assured him hastily. "You want to seduce me. You've made that crystal clear. Any clearer would require an X rating. I'm not going to be just another one of your women. I'm not made like that. I can't leave my panties beneath a man's bed to be swept out with the trash. That's why I'm still a virgin, because it means something to me and I'm not going to toss my virginity at your charming feet just because you're the most gorgeous, fascinating man I've ever met and I happen to like your last name. Those are not good enough reasons." She nodded her head to punctuate the rush of words, then looked horrified by what she'd admitted at the last.

"The most gorgeous, fascinating man you've ever met?" he said, his dark eyes glittering.

"There are oodles of gorgeous men around. And dusty, boring ancient texts are fascinating too," she muttered. "Stay away from me. I'm not going to fall for your seduction."

"Doona you even wish to know my intentions?" he purred.

"No. Absolutely not. Go away." Her back struck the wall and she stumbled a little, then folded her arms across her chest and scowled up at him.

"I'm not going away. And I am going to tell you." He rested his palms against the wall on either side of her head, walling her in with his powerful body.

"I'm waiting with bated breath." She faked a delicate yawn and examined her cuticles.

"Chloe-lass, I'm going to keep you."

"Keep me, my ass," she snapped. "I don't agree to being kept."

"Forever," he said, with a chilling smile. "And you will."

"Argh! Can't I just not dream about that man one freaking night?" Chloe cried, rolling over in bed and pulling the pillow over her head.

He was on her mind incessantly when she was awake. She didn't think it was so much to ask to be able to escape him in her dreams. She'd even dreamed about him when she'd dozed on the airplane! And all the dreams had been so intensely detailed that they'd seemed almost real. In this one, she'd been able to smell the spicy man-scent of him, to feel his warm breath fanning her face when he'd informed her he was going to keep her.

As if!

What did her dream Dageus think? she brooded irritably. That such a barbaric, utterly Teutonic declaration would melt her to her toes?

Wait a minute, she thought, backtracking mentally—it had been *her* dream, which meant that it wasn't what he thought, but apparently what *she* was subconsciously thinking about.

Oh, Zanders, you are so not politically correct, she thought dismally.

It *had* melted her. She'd love to hear such words from him. One teeny declaration of that sort and she'd be stuck on him like superglue.

She sat up and flung the pillow across the room in frustration. The Gaulish Ghost in New York had been fascinating enough, but the glimpse of emotion she'd seen last night when he'd been reunited with his brother had made him even more dangerously intriguing.

It had been one thing to think of him as a womanizer, a man not capable of love.

But she couldn't think that anymore, because she'd seen love in his eyes. Love

that she wanted to know more about. She'd glimpsed depths to him that she'd convinced herself he didn't have. What had happened between the two brothers to make them so estranged? What had happened to Dageus MacKeltar to make him so tightly guard his emotions?

She was doing it—wanting to be the woman who got inside him. Dangerous want, that.

She hugged her knees and rested her chin atop them, brooding.

A significant part of the blame for her dream, she thought peevishly, could be attributed to Gwen. Last night, after Chloe had finished showering, Gwen had brought a dinner tray to her room. She'd stayed while Chloe had eaten, and the talk had turned, as it was wont to do when women got together, to men.

Specifically to Keltar men.

Facts that Chloe had known about Dageus prior to Gwen's little visit: He was irresistibly seductive; he had a fantastic body—she'd seen it when he'd dropped his towel; he wore condoms for the "Extra-Large Man."

And now—thank you Gwen MacKeltar—she knew that he was a man of both immense appetites and stamina, and had been known to spend, not a few hours, but *days* in bed with a woman. Oh, Gwen hadn't actually come out and said those things, but she'd made her point dear enough in bits and pieces that she'd dropped.

Days in bed? She couldn't even begin to imagine what that would be like.

Oh, yes, you can, a snide little voice poked, *you dreamt about it a few nights ago, in shocking detail for a virgin.*

Scowling, she pushed her curls out of her face and swung her legs over the side of the massive, antique bed piled with down ticks. Her toes dangled a foot above the floor and she had to hop to get out of it.

Shaking her head, she grabbed her clothes and headed for the shower. She didn't really need to, having showered late last night, but this morning she suspected she might benefit from a cold one.

When she stepped out into the corridor a half an hour later, she stopped abruptly, bristling. She'd taken a chilly shower, forcing herself to think about the artifacts she might get to see, and what she'd like to explore first. It had taken her nearly the entire half an hour to get him off her mind, and now he was right back on it.

"What are you doing?" she asked grumpily, feeling that dratted, instant surge of attraction that demanded plaintively (and incessantly!), *Would you just jump on him and to hell with the consequences?* The man of her dreams—literally—was sitting on the floor, leaning against the door across the corridor from hers, his long legs outstretched, his arms folded over his chest. He wore black trousers and a charcoal crew-neck wool sweater stretched over his powerful torso, showcasing his perfect physique. He'd shaved, and the skin on his face looked smooth and soft as velvet. Coppery eyes met hers.

He rose, towering over her, his sheer masculinity making her feel small and feminine.

"I was waiting for you. Good morrow, lass. Did you have pleasant dreams?" he inquired silkily.

Chloe kept her expression bland. He looked immensely pleased with himself this morning, and there was no way she was letting him know she'd had even one nocturnal thought about him. "I can't remember," she said, blinking guilelessly. "In fact, I slept so deeply I don't think I dreamt at all."

"Indeed," he murmured. When he moved forward, she nearly jumped out of her skin, but he simply reached behind her and pulled the door to her bedchamber shut.

Then backed her against it.

"Hey," she snapped.

"I sought but to give you a good morrow kiss, lass. 'Tis a Scots custom."

She craned her neck, scowling up at him, and gave him a look that said *Yeah, right, nice try*.

"A wee one. No tongue. I promise," he said, his lips curving faintly.

"You never give up, do you?"

"I never will, sweet. Doona you know that by now?"

Oooh, that was beginning to take on shades of her dream. And he'd called her "sweet," a little endearment. She damped her mouth shut and shook her head.

He lifted his hand to her face and lightly traced his fingers down the curve of her cheek. A soft touch, nothing overtly seductive about it. The gentleness of it startled her, stilled her. He moved his hand from her face to her soft curls, threading them through his fingers.

"Have I told you, Chloe-lass, that you're beautiful?" he said softly.

She narrowed her eyes. If he thought a generic compliment would buy him a kiss, he was sadly mistaken.

"Och, aye, lovely as can be." He smudged her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "And without a trace of artifice. I sat in my cab and stared at you the day I first saw you. I watched other men looking at you and wished them blind. You bent back into the car to say something to your driver. You were wearing a black skirt and jacket with a sweater the color of heather, and your hair was falling into your eyes and you kept pushing it back. It was misting a bit, and the hose on your legs glistened with droplets of rain. You didn't mind the rain, though. For a moment, you tipped your head back, turning your face up to it. It took my breath away."

The caustic comment coiled on the tip of her tongue died.

He looked at her a long moment, then dropped his hands.

"Come, lass." He offered her his hand. "Let's fetch some breakfast, then I'd like to take you somewhere."

Chloe struggled for composure. The man had a way of throwing her off-kilter like no one else she'd ever known. Just when she thought she knew him, he threw something unexpected at her. Where had that just come from? He remembered exactly what she'd been wearing the day they'd met, and it *had* been misting that morning. And she had briefly turned her face up into the mist; she'd always liked rain. She cleared her throat. "So when do I get to see the texts?" she

hastily forced the conversation to less uncertain terrain.

"Soon. Very soon."

Other men were watching you and I wished them blind. She shook her head, trying to scatter his words from her mind. Unable to determine what "face value" to place upon them. "Does your brother have other artifacts too?" she pressed brightly.

"Aye. You'll see many things before the day is through."

"Really? Like what?"

He smiled faintly at her eagerness and caught her hands in his. "Do you know how I know when you're excited about something?"

Chloe shook her head.

"Your fingers start to curl, as if you're imagining touching whatever it is you're thinking about."

She blushed. She hadn't known she was so transparent.

"Och, lass,'tis charming. Do you recall that I said I could show you a Scotland no other man ever could?"

She nodded.

"Well, this afternoon, lass," he said with a strangely wry note in his voice, "I'll be making good on that promise."

Some distance from the castle in which Chloe and Dageus were currently breakfasting, a man leaned back against the side of a nondescript rental car, talking quietly on the phone.

"I haven't had the opportunity to get close," Trevor was telling Simon. "But it's only a matter of time."

"You were supposed to take care of her before they left London," Simon's voice was faint on the cell phone, yet still rang with implacable authority.

"I couldn't get near her. The man is constantly on guard."

"What makes you think you can get dose on Keltar ground?"

"He'll drop his guard eventually, if only for a few minutes. Just give me a few more days."

"It's too risky."

"It's too risky *not* to. He has an emotional bond with her. We need his ties gone. You said so yourself, Simon."

"Forty-eight hours. Ring me every six. Then I want you out of there. I'm not willing to run the risk that one of our Order is taken alive. He must know nothing about the Prophecy."

With a soft murmur of assent, Trevor hung up.

Chapter 15

The day had been sunny and surprisingly temperate for March in the Highlands: mid-forties, a light breeze, the sky dotted by a few fat, fluffy white clouds.

It had been one of the most exhilarating days of Chloe's life.

After breakfast, she, Dageus, Drustan, and Gwen had driven to the north, taking the winding roads to the top of a small mountain, above the colorful, bustling city of Alborath, where'd she'd met Dageus's cousins, Christopher and Maggie MacKeltar, and their many children.

She'd spent the day with Gwen and Maggie, touring the *second* MacKeltar castle (this one quite a bit older than Gwen's). She'd seen artifacts that Tom would have blithely committed felonies to acquire: ancient texts sealed in protective cases, weapons and armor from too many different centuries to count, rune stones scattered casually about the gardens. She'd toured the portrait gallery lining the great hall, a painted history of centuries of the MacKeltar clan—what a wonder to know such roots! She'd brushed her fingertips to tapestries that should be in museums, furniture that belonged under much tighter security than she'd been able to see on the grounds. Though she'd inquired repeatedly and rather anxiously about their anti-theft system (which seemed criminally nonexistent), she'd gotten nothing but reassuring smiles, forcing her to conclude that none of the Keltars bothered to lock things up.

The castle itself was an artifact, meticulously preserved and protected from time's gentle erosion. She'd wandered through the day in a dreamy kind of stupefaction.

Now she stood on the front steps of the castle with Gwen in the rosy, early evening light. The sun was resting on the horizon and tendrils of mist were wisping up from the ground. She could see for miles from her perch on the wide stone stairs, past a sparkling many-tiered fountain, out over the valley where the lights of Alborath were nudging back the encroaching twilight. She could imagine how glorious the Highlands would be in spring, or better yet, the full bloom of late summer. She wondered if she might find some way to still be there by then. Maybe after her month with Dageus, she mused, she would stay in Scotland, indefinitely.

Her gaze skimmed the front lawn, coming to rest on the gorgeous, dark man who'd turned her world so completely upside down in just under a week. He was standing, some distance from the castle, inside a circle of massive, ancient stones, talking with Drustan. Gwen had told her the brothers hadn't seen each other in years, though she'd offered no explanation for their estrangement. Inquisitive as Chloe usually was, for a change, she'd resisted prying. It just hadn't seemed right.

"It's so beautiful here," she said, sighing wistfully. To live here, to belong in such a place. The rowdy enthusiasm of Maggie and Christopher's six children, from teens down to tots, was unlike anything Chloe had ever experienced. The castle was stuffed to overflowing with family and roots, the air rang with the sounds of children playing and occasional bickering. As an only child, raised by an elderly grandparent, Chloe had never seen anything like it before.

"That it is," Gwen agreed. "They call those stones the *Ban Drochaid*," she told Chloe, gesturing at the circle. "It means 'the white bridge.'"

" 'The white bridge,' " Chloe echoed. "That's an odd name for a group of stones."

Gwen shrugged, a mysterious smile playing about her lips. "There are lots of legends in Scotland about such stones." She paused. "Some people say they're portals to another time."

"I read a romance novel like that once."

"You read romance novels?" Gwen exclaimed, delighted.

The next few moments were filled with a hasty comparison of favorite titles, female bonding, and recommendations.

"I *knew* I liked you." Gwen beamed. "When you were talking earlier about the history of all those artifacts, I was afraid you might be the stuffy literary type. Nothing against literary novels," she added hastily, "but if I want to get all existential and depressed, I'll pick a fight with my husband or watch CNN." She was silent a moment, her hand resting lightly on her rounded belly. "Scotland isn't like any other country in the world, Chloe. You can almost feel the magic in the air, can't you?"

Chloe cocked her head and studied the towering megaliths. The stones were

thousands of years old and their purpose had long been heatedly debated by scholars, archaeoastronomers, anthropologists, even mathematicians. They were a mystery modern man had never been able to unravel.

And yes, she did feel a brush of magic about them, a sense of ancient secrets, and was struck suddenly by how right Dageus looked standing in the middle of them. Like a primitive sorcerer, wild and forbidding, a keeper of secrets, arcane and profane. She rolled her eyes at her absurd fancy.

"What is he doing, Gwen?" she asked, squinting. Gwen shrugged but didn't reply. It looked as if he was writing something on the inner face of each stone. There were thirteen, towering around a center slab that was fashioned of two stone supports, and one large flat stone placed atop it in the shape of a squat dolmen.

As Chloe watched, Dageus moved to the next stone, his hand moving with brisk surety across its inner face. He *was* writing on it, she realized. How odd. She narrowed her eyes. God, the man was beautiful. He'd changed after breakfast. Soft, faded jeans hugged his powerful thighs and muscled butt. A thick wool sweater and hiking boots completed his rugged outdoorsman look. His hair fell in a single braid to his waist.

I'm going to keep you forever, her dream Dageus had said. *You've got it bad, Zanders*, she reluctantly acknowledged with a little sigh.

"You have feelings for him," Gwen murmured, jarring her.

Chloe paled. "Is it that obvious?"

"To someone who knows what to look for. I've never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you, Chloe."

"If he looks at me any differently than others, it's only because most women fall into bed with him the minute they meet him," Chloe said, puffing a curly strand of hair from her face. "I'm just the one who got away." *So far*, was the dry thought accompanying that.

"Yes, and that's *all* they ever do."

That got her attention. "Isn't that all he wants?"

"No. But most women never get past that beautiful face and body, his strength and his reserve. They never, never trust him with their hearts."

Chloe pulled her long hair back, twisting it into a loose knot, and held her silence, hoping Gwen might continue to volunteer information. She was in no hurry to admit to her pathetic romanticizing, which had only worsened throughout the day. All day long she'd been treated to glimpses of the incredible relationship between Gwen and her husband. She'd watched, with shameless longing, the way Drustan treated his wife. They were so unabashedly in love with each other.

Because he looked so much like Dageus, comparisons had been inevitable. Drustan had popped up oodles of times, toting a light jacket for Gwen, or a cup of tea, or an inquiry if her back ached, if she needed a rub, if she needed to rest, if she'd like him to leap into the sky and pull down the blasted sun.

Making Chloe think ridiculous thoughts about his brother.

Oh, yes, she had feelings. Treacherous, deceitful little feelings.

"Chloe, Dageus doesn't look for love from a woman, because he's never been given any reason to."

Chloe's eyes widened and she shook her head disbelievingly. "That's impossible, Gwen. A man like him—"

"Terrifies most women. So they take what he offers, but they find some other man to love. A safer man. A man they feel more in control with. Is he doing the same thing to you? I thought you were smarter than that."

Chloe jerked, wondering how the conversation had gotten so personal so fast.

But Gwen wasn't done yet. "Sometimes—and trust me, I know this from personal experience—a girl has to take a leap of faith. If you don't try, you'll never know what might have been. Is that how you want to live?"

Chloe fumbled for a reply, but came up empty-handed, because deep inside her that nagging voice that had so persistently begun asking recently "is this all there is?" was nodding sagely, agreeing with Gwen's words. *Naught risked, naught gained*, Grandda had always said. When had she forgotten that? Chloe

wondered, staring at the ancient stones. When she was nineteen, and Grandda died, leaving her alone in the world?

As she stood there, atop the MacKeltar's mountain in the falling twilight, Chloe was suddenly back in Kansas again, in the silent cemetery, after all their friends had gone, weeping at the foot of his grave. Uncertain, poised on the brink of adulthood, with no one to help her make decisions and choose her way. She'd suffered the comforting delusion that he would live forever, not die at a mere seventy-three from a stroke. She'd gone away to college, never imagining that he wouldn't always be there, at home, puttering around his garden, waiting for her.

The phone call came during finals week her sophomore year. She'd just talked to him on the phone a few days before. One day he was there, the next day he was gone. She hadn't even gotten to say good-bye. Same as her parents. Couldn't anyone die a slow death from some disease, she'd felt like wailing (painlessly, of course, she'd not wish a painful death on anyone), and give her a damned sense of closure? Did they have to just go away? One moment, smiling and alive, the next, still and silent and forever lost. There were so many things she hadn't gotten to say to him before he left. He'd seemed so fragile in his coffin; her robust, temperamental Scot, who'd always seemed invincible to her.

Was that when she'd begun playing things safe? Because she'd felt like a turtle without a shell, fragile and exposed, unwilling to love and lose again? Oh, she'd not decided such a thing consciously, but she'd gone back to college and buried herself in a double major, then a master's. Without even thinking, she'd kept herself too busy to get involved.

She blinked. The grief was still raw, as if she'd never faced it, only pushed it into a dark corner, blocking it. It occurred to her that maybe a person couldn't shut out one emotion, such as grief, without losing touch with all of them. By shutting out pain, refusing to face it, had she missed innumerable chances to love?

Chloe glanced at Gwen searchingly. "It sounds like you're encouraging me."

"I am. He's going to ask something of you. The mere fact that he's going to ask it speaks more than any words could, of how he feels about you."

"What is he going to ask me?"

"You'll know soon enough." Gwen paused and sighed heavily, as if she were having a heated internal debate with herself. Then she said, "Chloe, Drustan and Dageus come from a world that's hard for girls like us to understand. A world that—though it may initially seem impossible—is firmly grounded in reality. Just because science can't explain something, doesn't make it any less real. I'm a scientist and I know what I'm talking about. I've seen things that defy my understanding of physics. They're good men. The best. Keep an open mind and heart, because I can tell you one thing for sure: when these Keltars love, they love completely and forever."

"You're freaking me out," Chloe said uneasily.

"You haven't *begun* to be freaked out. One question, just between you and me, and don't lie to me: Do you want him?"

She stared at Gwen in silence for a long moment. "Is this *really* just between you and me?"

Gwen nodded.

"I have since the moment I met him," she admitted simply. "And it doesn't make a bit of sense to me. I'm all possessive about him, and I have no right to be. It's crazy. I've never felt anything like this before. I can't even reason with it," she said, frustration underscoring her words.

Gwen's smile was radiant. "Oh, Chloe, the only time reason fails is when we're trying to convince our minds of something our heart knows isn't true. Stop trying. Listen with your heart."

"I doona like this," Drustan growled at Dageus.

"Did you give Gwen a choice?" Dageus countered, as he finished etching the second-to-last formula on the central slab. He need but etch the final one to open the bridge through time. He and Drustan had agreed that he should return to six months after last he'd been there, to avoid his past self, and in hopes that Silvan may have discovered something useful in the interim. "Chloe's a strong lass, Drustan. She held the point of my own sword at my chest. She fought off her attacker valiantly. She *chose* to come to Scotland with me. Though sometimes she hesitates, she fears nothing. And she's smart, she speaks many languages, she

knows the old myths, and she loves artifacts. I'm about to take her to them. If for naught else, she'll forgive me for that," he added, dryly.

Och, aye, she would. He could put texts in her hands that would make her weep with the joy of a true bibliophile and guardian of relics. They shared that: Her chosen profession was to preserve the old things, and she hadn't been satisfied with merely preserving, she'd studied it all, much as he had in his role as Keltar Druid.

"Gwen knew what I was."

"But she didn't believe you," Dageus reminded. "She thought you were mad."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. If you'd haud yer wheesht a moment, you'd hear that I intend to give her a choice."

"You do?"

"I'm no' entirely without scruples," was his mocking reply.

"You're going to tell her?"

Dageus shrugged. "I said I'd give her a choice."

"The honorable thing would be to tell her—"

Dageus's head whipped up and his eyes sparked dangerously. "I doona have time to tell her!" he hissed. "I doona have time to try to convince her, or help her understand!"

Silvery gaze warred with copper.

"You do realize that once you take her through, she's going to know that you're a Druid, Dageus. You'll no longer be able to pretend you're naught but a man."

"I'll deal with that. She knows there's something no' quite right with me."

"But what if she..." Drustan trailed off, but Dageus knew he'd been about to voice the fear that he'd been forced to face when he'd sent Gwen back.

"What if she runs screaming from me? Cries 'pagan sorcerer' and hates me?" Dageus said with a chilly smile. ' 'Tis my worry, no' yours."

"Dageus—"

"Drustan, I need her. I *need* her."

Drustan stared at the scarce-concealed despair in his brother's eyes, and had a sudden flash of insight: Dageus was walking a razor's edge, and he knew it. He knew he had no right to take Chloe, verily, he knew he had no right to have brought her this far. But were Dageus to give up on those things he wanted—to accept that, because he was dark, he had no promise of a future, no true rights to anything—he would have nothing left to live for. There would be nothing to keep him fighting another day.

And which would win then? Honor? Or the seduction of absolute power?

Christ, Drustan thought, a chill seeping through his veins, the day his brother stopped wanting, the day he stopped believing there was hope, he would have to face the fact that his only choices were to become utterly evil... or...

Drustan couldn't make himself finish that thought. And in Dageus's tortured gaze, he could see that his twin had figured this all out long ago, and was fighting the only way he could. If Dageus's desire for Chloe was the thing standing most firmly betwixt he and the gates of hell itself, Drustan would chain the wee lass to his brother himself.

A bitter smile curved Dageus's lips, as if he sensed Drustan's thoughts.

"Besides," Dageus said with light mockery, "at least I know I can return her. Gwen had no such assurance, yet you took her. If aught goes awry with me, I promise to send Chloe back, one way or another." It would mean he was dying, for that was the only way he'd let her go. Even then, she might have to be pried from his fingers as the life fled his body.

"All right." Drustan nodded slowly. "When will you return?"

"Look for us three days hence. 'Tis as close as I care to pass myself."

They regarded each other in silence, much unsaid between them. Then there was no further opportunity, for Chloe and Gwen joined them in the circle.

"What are you doing?" Chloe asked curiously, peering at them. "Why are you writing on those stones, Dageus?"

Dageus looked at her a long moment, drinking her in greedily. Och, she was beautiful, so unselfconscious, standing there in her slim blue trews, sweater, and hiking boots, her hair a riot of curls tucked into a loose knot that was already falling out. Huge eyes, wide and full of innocent joy. She wore Scotland well. With a flush in her cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes.

Eyes that, in a short time, might regard him with fear and loathing, as the lasses in his century would have, had he ever revealed the extent of his Druid power.

And if such comes to pass? his honor prodded.

I'll do aught I can to seduce *her back* out of it, he thought, shrugging, *using every underhanded trick I've got*. He'd give up when he was dead.

If anyone could accept it, she could. Modern women were different from the lasses of his time. While sixteenth-century lasses were quick to see "magycks" in the inexplicable, twenty-first-century women sought scientific explanations, were better able to abide the thought of natural laws and physics beyond their understanding. He suspected'twas because so much progress had been made into scientific inquiry in the past century, explaining previously inexplicable things and exposing a whole new realm of mystery.

Chloe was a strong, curious, resilient lass. Though not a physicist like Gwen, she was clever and had knowledge of both the Old World and the new. An added boon was her insatiable curiosity, which had already led her into places most would not have ventured. She had all the right ingredients to be able to accept what she was soon going to experience.

And he would be there to help her understand. If he knew Chloe half as well as he thought he did, once she recovered from shock, she would be positively giddy with excitement.

Averting his gaze from Chloe's inquisitive look, he glanced at Gwen. "Be well, lass," he said. He hugged her, then Drustan, and stepped away.

"What's going on?" Chloe asked. "Why are you saying good-bye to Gwen and Drustan? Aren't we staying here to work on his books?" When Dageus didn't

answer, she looked at Gwen, but Gwen and Drustan had turned and were walking out of the circle.

She looked back at Dageus.

He extended his hand to her. "I have to leave, Chloe-lass."

"What? What on earth are you talking about?" There was no car nearby. Leave how? For where? Without her? He'd said "*I* have to leave" not "we." Her chest felt suddenly tight.

"Will you come with me?"

The tightness eased a bit, but confusion still reigned. "I d-don't understand," Chloe sputtered. "Where?"

"I can't tell you where. I have to show you."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," she protested.

"Och, nay, lass. Give me a bit more time and you'll not think it so," he said lightly. But his eyes weren't light. They were intense and...

Listen with your heart, Gwen had said. Chloe drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She forced herself to push her preconceptions aside, and tried *looking* with her heart...

...and she saw it. There in his eyes. The pain she'd glimpsed on the plane, but had told herself wasn't really there.

More than pain. A brutal, unceasing despair.

He was waiting, one strong hand outstretched. She had no idea what he was doing, or where he thought he was going. He was asking her to say "yes" without knowing. He was asking for that leap of faith Gwen had warned her about. For the second time in less than forty-eight hours, the man was asking her to throw all caution to the wind and leap with him, trusting that he wouldn't let her fall.

Do it, Evan MacGregor's voice suddenly said in her heart. *You may not have nine lives, Chloe-cat, but you mustn't be afraid to live the one you've got.*

Chills shivered up her spine, raising the fine hair on her skin. She glanced around at the thirteen stones encircling them, with funny symbols that looked like formulas etched on their inner faces. More symbols on the central slab.

Was she about to find out what those standing stones had been used for? The concept was too fantastic for her to wrap her brain around.

What on earth did he think was going to happen?

Logic insisted *nothing* was going to happen in those stones. Curiosity was proposing, quite persuasively, that if something did, she'd have to be a fool to miss it.

She blew out a gusty sigh. What was one more plunge, anyway? she thought with a mental shrug. She'd already been so completely derailed from the normal track of her life that she couldn't get too worked up at the prospect of another loopy turn. And frankly, the ride had never been so fascinating. Drawing herself up to her full height, squaring both her shoulders and her resolve, she turned back to Dageus and slipped her hand into his. Notching her chin up, she met his gaze and said, "Fine. Let's go, then." She was proud of herself for how firm and nonchalant it had come out.

His eyes flared. "You'll come? Without knowing where I'm taking you?"

"If you think I've come this far to be dumped along the wayside, you don't know me very well, MacKeltar," she said lightly, seeking strength in levity. The moment was simply too tense. "I'm the woman who snooped beneath your bed, remember? I'm slave to my curiosity. If you're going somewhere, I am too. You're not getting away from me yet." *God, had she really said that?*

"That sounds as if you're telling me you plan to keep me, lass." His eyes narrowed and he went very still.

Chloe caught her breath. It was so similar to her dream!

He smiled then, a slow smile that caused tiny lines about his eyes to crinkle, and for a moment something danced within the coppery depths. Something younger and... free and breathtakingly beautiful. "I'm yours for the asking, sweet."

She forgot how to breathe for a moment.

Then his eyes went cool again and abruptly, he turned back toward the center slab and wrote a series of symbols. "Hold my hand and doona let go."

"Keep him safe, Chloe," Gwen shouted, as a sudden, fierce wind kicked up through the stones, scattering dried leaves in swirling eddies of mist.

Safe from what? Chloe wondered.

And then she wondered no more, because suddenly the stones began spinning in a circle around her—but that wasn't possible! And even while she was arguing with herself over what was and was not possible, she lost the ground and was upside down, or something, and then she lost the sky too. Grass and twilight swirled together, speckled by a mad rush of stars. The wind soared to a deafening howl, and suddenly she was... *different* somehow. She glanced wildly about for Drustan and Gwen, but they were gone, and she could see nothing at all, not even Dageus. A terrible gravity seemed to be pulling at her, sucking her in and stretching her out, bending her in impossible ways. She thought she heard a sonic boom, and then suddenly there was a flash of white so blinding that she lost all sense of sight and sound.

She could no longer feel Dageus's hand.

She could no longer feel her *own* hand!

She tried to open her mouth and scream, but she had no mouth to open. The white grew ever more intense and, though there was no longer any sense of motion, she felt a nauseating vertigo. There was no sound, but the silence itself seemed to have crushing substance.

Just when she was certain she couldn't endure it one more instant, the white was gone so abruptly that the blackness slammed into her with all the force of a Mack truck.

Then there was feeling in her body again, and she wasn't thrilled to have it back. Her mouth was dry as a desert, her head felt swollen and oversized, and she was pretty sure she was about to throw up.

Oh, *Zanders*, she chided herself weakly, *I think this was a little more than just another loopy turn.*

Chloe stumbled and collapsed to the ice-covered ground.

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."

—THE PROPHETESS EIRU, sixth century B.C.E.

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."

—MIDHE CODEX, seventh century C.E.

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it."

—GEORGE SANTAYANA, twentieth century C.E.

JULY 24,1522

Chapter 16

There were voices inside his head. Thirteen distinct ones: twelve men and the jewel-bright tones of a sultry-voiced woman, talking in a language he couldn't understand.

The voices were but a susurrus, a sibilant murmuring. No more than a stiff wind rustling through oaks, yet like a wind, it blew darkly through him, stripping away his humanity like a fragile autumn leaf no longer firmly anchored to its branch. It was the wind of winter and of death and it accepted no censure and would abide no moral judgment.

There was only hunger. The hunger of thirteen souls confined for four thousand years in a place that was not a place, in a time that was not a time. Locked away for four thousand years. Locked away for one-hundred-and-forty six *million* days, for three-and-a-half *billion* hours—and if that was not eternity, what was?

Imprisoned.

Adrift in nothing.

Alive in that heinous dark oblivion. Eternally aware. Hungry, with no mouth to feed. Lusting, with no body to ease. Itching, with no fingers to scratch.

Hating, hating, hating.

A seething mass of raw power, unsated for millennia.

And as they felt, so Dageus felt, too, lost in darkness.

The storm was nature at her height of savagery. Chloe had never seen such a squall before. Rain mixed with jagged chunks of hail pelted from the sky, bruising her, stinging her skin, even through the thickness of her jacket and sweater.

"Ow!" Chloe cried "Ow!" A large chunk of ice struck her in the temple, another in the small of her back. Cursing, she tucked into a protective ball on the hail-covered ground and wrapped her arms around her head.

The wind soared to a deafening pitch, keening and howling. She screamed into it, calling Dageus's name, but couldn't even hear her own voice above the din. The ground trembled and tree limbs crashed to the earth. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. The shrieking wind whipped her hair into a sodden tangle. She hunched in a ball with no hope but to endure it and pray it didn't get worse.

Then suddenly—as abruptly as the fierce storm had arisen—it was gone.

Simply gone. The hail stopped. The deluge ceased. The wind died. The night fell still and silent but for a soft hissing sound.

For a few moments Chloe mentally tallied her bruises, refusing to move. Moving would mean acknowledging she was alive. Acknowledging she was alive would mean she'd have to look around. And frankly, she wasn't sure she wanted to.

Ever. Thoughts were colliding in her head, all of them impossible.

Come on, Zanders, get a grip, the voice of reason endeavored valiantly to assert itself. *You're going to feel downright silly when you look up and see Gwen and Drustan standing there. When they say "Gee, don't you hate it when a storm comes up so fast? But that's how they are in the Highlands."*

She wasn't buying it. She wasn't certain of much at the moment, but she was pretty darned certain storms like that didn't happen, in the Highlands or anywhere else, and furthermore, she didn't hold out much hope that Gwen and Drustan were anywhere nearby. Something had happened in those stones. Just what, she couldn't say, but something... epic. Something that reeked of a kernel of truth secreted in ancient myths.

After a few more moments, she drew her arms back and peeped cautiously out. Rain poured from her hair, dripping down her face. She braced her palms on the ground and suddenly understood what the hissing noise was.

The earth was warm, as *if* it had been sun-heated all day, and the pellets of hail were steaming on it. How could the ground be warm? she wondered, baffled. It was March, for heaven's sake, and forty-degree weather didn't heat the soil. Even as she thought that, she realized the *air* was warm, now that the heavens had stopped dumping a small icy flood on her. Humid and positively summery.

Gingerly, she raised herself up a few inches and glanced about, only to discover

she was swathed in a cloud. While she'd huddled, a thick soupy fog had surrounded her. She was completely walled in by white. It made the already eerie situation even spookier.

"D-Dageus?" Her voice quavered a little. She cleared her throat and tried again.

If she was still in the circle of stones—and she was beginning to think that might be A Very Big If—she could no longer see them. The fog consumed everything. It was like being blind. She shivered, feeling horribly alone. The past few minutes had been so bizarre that she was beginning to wonder if she'd not... well, she wasn't sure what she was beginning to wonder, and would rather not wonder it.

Some people say they're portals...

She scooped at the fog with her hand. Condensation beaded on her palm. It was thick, dense stuff. She blew at the white air in front of her. It didn't puff away.

"H-hello?" she called, feeling frantic.

A dark swirl of movement flickered in the whiteness. There. No, she thought, turning, there. Inexplicably, the temperature dropped again and her teeth began to chatter. The hail stopped steaming on the ground.

She sat back on her knees, drenched to the bone, shivering and waiting nervously, half-expecting something awful to leap out at her.

Just when her frayed nerves were about to snap, Dageus glided out of the fog, or rather, one moment he wasn't there and then he materialized in front of her.

"Oh, thank *God*," Chloe breathed, relief flooding her. "Wh-what—" *just happened* was what she was trying to say, but the words died in her throat as he moved nearer.

He was Dageus, but somehow... not Dageus. As he moved, the fog swirled away from him like something out of a creepy sci-fi movie. Against the whiteness, he was a great, hulking dark shape. The expression on his chiseled features was as cold as the ice upon which she knelt.

She shook her head, once, twice, trying to scatter the idiotic illusion. Blinked

several times.

He's almost inhumanly beautiful, she thought, staring. The storm had ripped his hair free from his thong and it fell to his waist in a wet, wind-tossed tangle. He looked wild and untamed. Animal. Predatory.

He even moved like an animal, fluid strength and surety.

And all the devil ever wants in exchange, a small voice said warningly, *is a soul*.

Oh, puh-lease, Chloe rebuked herself sternly. *He's a man, nothing more. A big, beautiful, sometimes scary man, but that's all*.

Graceful as a stalking tiger, the big, beautiful, scary man dropped into a crouch on the ground before her, his dark eyes glinting in the shadowy night. They knelt mere inches apart. When he spoke, his words were painstakingly articulated, as if speaking was an immense effort. His words were carefully spaced, tight, coming in rushes, with pauses between.

"I will give you. Every. Artifact I own. If you kiss. Me and ask no. Questions."

"Huh?" Chloe gaped.

"No questions," he hissed. He shook his head violently, as if trying to scatter something from it.

Chloe's mouth snapped shut.

It was too dark to see his eyes clearly, the sharp planes of his face shadowed. In the misty gloom, his exotic coppery eyes looked black as midnight.

She peered at him. He was perfectly still, motionless as a tiger before the killing lunge. She reached for his hands and found them, in tight fists. *Most reserved when he feels most strongly*, she reminded herself. She closed her hands over his.

His body was racked with sudden shudders. He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again, she could have sworn she saw shadowy... *things* moving behind them, and she had that strange feeling she'd had once before in his penthouse, as if there was another presence with them, ancient and cold.

Then his eyes cleared, revealing such utter desolation that her chest tightened

and she almost couldn't draw a breath.

He hurt. And she wanted to take it away. Nothing else really mattered. She didn't even want his stupid artifacts in exchange; she only wanted to wipe that horrid, awful look from his eyes however she could.

She wet her lips and that was all the encouragement he seemed to need.

He crushed her in his arms, swept her up and, in a few powerful strides, backed her hard against one of the standing stones.

Ah, so the stones are still here, she thought dimly. Or I'm still here. Or something.

Then his mouth was hot and hungry on hers and she couldn't have cared less where she was or wasn't. She might have been leaning up against a great big nasty, winter-starved bear for all she cared, because Dageus was kissing her as if his life depended upon their tangle of tongues and the heat between them.

He sealed his mouth tightly over hers, his velvety tongue seeking, claiming. He thrust his hands into her wet curls, wrapping handfuls of it around his fists, holding her head cradled in his big, powerful hands, his hot tongue plunging deep into her mouth.

He kissed like no man she'd ever known. There was something about him, a rawness, an earthy sensuality that bordered on barbaric, something she'd never be able to explain to someone else. A woman had to be kissed by Dageus MacKeltar to fully understand how devastating it was. How it could bring a woman to her knees.

For a moment she couldn't even move. Could only take his kiss, not manage the strength to return it. She felt like she was being consumed, and knew that sex with him would be a little bit dirty and a whole lot raw. No inhibitions. She'd been tied to his bed with silken scarves; she knew what kind of man he was. *Dizzy*, light-headed, she dung to him, arching against him, reveling in the sensation of his big hands gliding over her body, one burrowing impatiently beneath her bra to close roughly over her breasts, teasing her nipples, the other cupping her bottom and lifting her against him. Feverishly, she wrapped her legs around his powerful hips.

She was so aroused that she throbbed, aching and empty. She whimpered into his mouth when he shifted that last bit, fitting them together so the hard ridge of him was cradled in her yielding heat. Oh, *finally*! After denying herself, refusing to even let herself *think* about it, he was there, trapped snugly in the vee of her thighs, huge, hot man. He braced her back against the stone again, grinding himself against her, driving her to an erotic frenzy.

Tangling her fingers in his thick silky hair, she strained against him, arching forward each time he thrust, meeting him. His lips were locked to hers, his tongue deep in her mouth. She was delirious with need. Her defenses had not merely dropped, they'd toppled, and she wanted shamelessly, everything, all that he'd been teasing her with for so long now.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he captured one of her hands in his and guided it between them, pressing her palm to the hard ridge in his jeans, and she gasped when she *realized* how big he was. She'd only caught a glimpse of him when he'd dropped his towel, but she'd been wondering about him ever since she'd found those incriminating condoms. It wasn't going to be easy to take him, she thought, with a dark erotic shiver. *Everything* about him was too much man, and it exhilarated her, seduced her into finally acknowledging her most private fantasies. By his sheer nature, he was the answer to them all. Dark, dominant, dangerous man.

She touched him frantically, trying to shape her fingers over him through his jeans, but the damn things were too constricting, strained by his heavy bulge. She gave a small whimper of frustration and, growling savagely, he shifted her in his arms, braced her against the stones, holding her with one arm, while roughly unfastening his jeans.

Chloe panted, her eyes wide, watching his beautiful dark face, taut with lust while he freed himself. She wanted, needed, was beyond thinking about it anymore. The intensity of the attraction between them was mind-numbing. Then he was pushing the hot, thick hardness of himself into her hand.

She couldn't close her hand around it. Her breath hitched in her throat and she dropped her head forward against his chest. There was no way.

"You can take me, lass." He cradled her jaw with his palm and forced her face back up for more urgent, heated kisses. He closed his hand over hers, moving it

along his thick erection. She whimpered, wishing her jeans would just melt away so she could take him inside her.

"Do you need me, Chloe?" he demanded.

"I'd say she does, but I doona think'tis either the time or the place," a dry voice cut through the night briskly.

Dageus stiffened against her with a savage oath.

Chloe made a sound that was half-startlement, half-sob. *No, no, no!* she wanted to scream. *I can't stop now!*

Never in her life had she wanted so desperately. She wished that whoever had spoken would simply disappear. She didn't want to come back to reality, didn't want to think about the consequences of what she was about to do. Didn't want to return to the myriad questions that she would have to face: about Dageus, about her whereabouts, about herself.

They froze in that intimate moment for what felt like a miserable eternity, then Dageus shuddered and with a hand beneath her bottom, leaned her against the stone and dislodged her hand. She had a hard time making herself let go and they waged a short, silent, silly little battle that he won, which she reluctantly conceded was probably only fair since it was part of his body. He stood still, inhaling measured breaths, then lowered her to the ground.

It took him several minutes to refasten his jeans. Dropping his dark head forward, lips to her ear, he said in a burr thickened by desire, "There will be no takin' this back, lass. Doona even think to be tellin' me later that you willna hae me. You will hae me." Then abruptly, wrapping one strong arm around her waist, he turned them both to greet the intruder.

Still dizzy and breathless with desire, it took Chloe a few moments to focus. When she did, she was startled to discover that the fog had vanished as utterly as the storm, leaving the night bathed in pearly luminance by a fat moon hovering just beyond the mighty oaks that towered around the circle of stones. She refused to dwell on the fact that a short time ago there had been no oaks around the circle of stones, only a vast expanse of manicured lawn. If she thought about that too long, she might start to feel sick to her stomach again.

So she concentrated instead on the tall, elderly man, with shoulder-length, snowy-white hair, clad in long blue robes, who stood about a dozen paces away, his narrow back to them.

"You can turn around now," Dageus barked at him.

"I was but ceding you what privacy I could," the man muttered defensively, his posture rigid.

"Had you wished to cede me privacy, you would have steered yourself right back into the castle, old man."

"Aye," the man snapped right back, "so you could off and disappear again? I think not. I lost you once. I'll no' be losing you again."

With that, the elderly man turned around to face them and Chloe's eyes widened in astonishment. She'd seen him somewhere before! But where?

Oh, no. As quickly as it occurred to her, she denied it, shaking her head. Earlier in the day, in the portrait gallery at Maggie MacKeltar's castle. She'd seen several portraits of him displayed in a section where half a dozen other paintings around them had been removed, leaving great dark spots on the wall. That was part of what had drawn her eye to them. Maggie had told her that the others from that particular century—the fifteen hundreds—had been taken down and sent out to be restored.

This man's face had lingered in her mind because she'd been captivated by his uncanny resemblance to Einstein. With his snowy hair, rich brown eyes feathered by fine lines, and deep grooves bracketing his mouth, the man looked unnervingly like the great theoretical physicist. Albeit with a slightly wizardish cast. Even Gwen had agreed with a sunny smile when Chloe had remarked upon it.

"Wh—who is th—that?" Chloe stammered to Dageus.

When Dageus didn't reply, the elderly man raked both hands through tufts of white hair and scowled. "I'm his da, m'dear. Silvan. 'Tis thinking, I am, that he told you no more than Drustan told Gwen afore he brought her here.

Is that so? Or did you even tell her that much?" He shot an accusing glance at

Dageus.

Dageus was as still as stone beside her. Chloe looked up at him, but he wouldn't look at her.

"You said your father was dead," she said uneasily.

"I am," Silvan agreed, "in the twenty-first century. But not in the sixteenth century, m'dear."

"Huh?" Chloe blinked.

"Rather odd when one ponders it," he allowed with a pensive expression. "As if I'm immortal in my own slice of time. Gives a thinking man the shivers."

"The s-sixteenth c-century?" She tugged on Dageus's sleeve in a plea for him to jump right in and clear things up anytime now. He didn't.

"Aye, m'dear," Silvan replied.

"As in, you mean that since I'm seeing you—which means either you're alive or I'm dreaming or I've lost my mind—that if I'm not dreaming and haven't lost my mind, I must be, er... where it is that you aren't dead?" Chloe asked gingerly, making certain she didn't spell it out too clearly because then she'd have to entertain it as a valid thought.

"A brilliant deduction, m'dear," Silvan said approvingly. "Though a bit roundabout. Still, you've the look of a clever lass about you."

"Oh, no," Chloe said firmly, shaking her head. "This isn't happening. I'm *not* in the sixteenth century. That's not possible." She looked up at Dageus again, but he was still refusing to look at her.

Disjointed bits of conversation flashed through her mind: talk of portals and ancient curses and mythical races.

Chloe stared at Dageus's chiseled profile, sorting through facts that were suddenly imbued with a terrible significance: He knew more languages than anyone she'd ever met, languages long dead; he had artifacts in mint condition; he was searching books that centered on the history of ancient Ireland and Scotland. He'd stood her in the center of a circle of ancient stones and asked to

her to go somewhere with him that he couldn't tell her about, but had to show her, as if only seeing was believing. And in that circle of stones a powerful storm had risen and she'd felt as if she were being torn apart. There'd been a sudden climate change, the scenery currently included full-grown, century-old trees that hadn't been there before, and there was an elderly man claiming to be his father—in the sixteenth century.

And while they were on that topic—if any part of her current circumstances was actually real—what was his father doing in the *sixteenth century*, for heaven's sake? She latched onto that lovely little bit of blatant illogic as proof that she must be dreaming. Unless...

What if I told you, lass, that I'm a Druid from long past? "What?" she snapped, glaring up at him. "Am I supposed to believe that *you're* from the sixteenth century too?"

He finally looked at her then, and said stiffly, "I was born in fourteen hundred and eighty-two, Chloe."

She jerked as if he'd struck her. Then she started laughing, and even she heard the note of hysteria in her voice. "Right," she said gaily. "And I'm the Tooth Fairy."

"You know you felt something about me," he pressed ruthlessly. "I know you did. I could see it in the way you watched me sometimes."

God, she had. Repeatedly. Felt that he was strangely anachronistic, felt a bizarre sense of ancientness.

"You're strong, Chloe-lass. You can accept this. I know you can. I'll help you. I can explain it to you, and you'll see that'tis no'... magic, but a sort of physics modern men doona—"

"Oh, no," she cut him off, shaking her head vehemently. A hiccup terminated her laughter abruptly. "It's impossible," she insisted, rejecting it all in one grand unilateral sweep. "This is all impossible." Hiccup. "I'm dreaming, or... something. I don't know what, but I'm not going to"—*hiccup*—"think about it anymore. So don't even bother trying to convince—"

She broke off, suddenly too light-headed to continue. The trauma of the storm,

the absurdity of the conversation was all too much. Her knees felt as if they might buckle beneath her. *Really*, she thought dimly, *there was only so much a girl could be expected to handle, and time-travelling Druids just weren't part of it*. More of that helpless laughter bubbled inside her.

As if from a far distance, she heard Silvan say gruffly, ' 'Tis good to be seeing you again, lad. Nellie and I have been sore fashed o'er you. Och, the wee lass is going, son. You might catch her now."

When Dageus's strong arms slipped around her, Chloe tuned out the voices and embraced the mercy of oblivion, because she just knew that when she woke up again, everything would be all right. She'd be in bed, in Gwen and Drustan's castle, having had one of those strangely intense dreams about Dageus.

I like the sex dreams better was her final peevish thought, as her knees gave way and her mind went blank.

Adam Black was dozing—not sleeping, for the Tuatha Dé Danaan did not sleep—but drifting in memory and time when the nine members of the council appeared behind his queen's dais.

He sat up abruptly.

One of them spoke into the queen's ear. She nodded and dismissed them back to wherever it was the elusive council made their home.

Then Aoibheal, queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, raised her hands to the sky and said, "The council has spoken. It shall be trial by blood."

Adam tensed to rise, but caught himself, and forced himself to sink back down on his cushioned chaise. He waited, measuring the reactions of the others gathered in the forest bower on the isle of Morar where the queen was wont to hold her court. Drowsing beneath silken canopies, the others stirred languidly, their melodic voices humming softly.

He heard no protests. Fools, he thought, *it's a wonder we've survived this long*. Though immortal, they could be destroyed.

When Adam spoke, his voice was dispassionate, bordering on bored, as befitted

his kind. "My queen, I would speak, if you will it."

Aoibheal glanced his way. There was a glimmer of appreciation in her gaze as it raked over him. He wore her favored glamour—that of a tall, dark-haired smith, rippling with muscle. An otherworldly beautiful man who was wont to waylay human travelers, particularly women. A smith who took them to places and did things to them they later recalled as dark dreams of unending pleasure.

"You have my ear." She inclined her head regally.

And on rare occasions, Adam thought, other parts of her when she so graced him. Aoibheal had a certain fondness for him, and he was counting on it now. He was unlike any other of their race in small ways that baffled both he and them. But the queen seemed to enjoy those differences. Of all her subjects, Adam suspected he was the only one who still managed to surprise her. And surprise was nectar of the gods to those who lived forever, to those who'd lost wonder and awe an eternity ago. To those who spied on mortal's dreams because they possessed no dreams of their own.

"My queen," he said, sinking to one knee before her, "I know the Keltar broke his oath. But if one examines these Keltar, one finds that they have, for thousands of years, comported themselves in exemplary fashion."

The queen regarded him a long cool moment, then shrugged a delicate shoulder. "So?"

"Consider the man's brother, my queen. When Drustan was enchanted by a seer and forced to slumber for five centuries, the Keltar line was destroyed. When he was awakened in the twenty-first century by a woman, he went to extraordinary lengths to return to his time and prevent the catastrophe from happening so their line would remain intact, always protecting the lore."

"I am aware of that. Unfortunate his brother wasn't more like him."

"I believe he is. Dageus broke his oath solely to save Drustan's life."

"That's personal motive. The line was not threatened. They were expressly forbidden to use the stones for personal gain."

"How was it personal gain?" Adam countered. "What did Dageus gain by so

doing? Though he saved Drustan's life, Drustan continued to slumber. He didn't get his brother back. He didn't get anything."

"Then more fool he."

"He is as honorable as his brother. There's no evil in what he did."

"The question is not if he is evil, it's if he broke his oath, and he did. The terms of The Compact were clearly defined."

Adam drew a careful breath. "We are the ones who gave them the power to travel through time. If we hadn't, the temptation would never have existed."

"Ah, now it's our fault?"

"I'm merely saying that he didn't use the stones to gain wealth or political power. He did it for love."

"You sound like a human."

It was the lowest insult among his kind.

Adam remained wisely silent. He'd had his proverbial wings dipped before by his queen.

"Regardless of why he did it, Adam, he now harbors our ancient enemy within him."

"But he still isn't dark, my queen. It's been many mortal months since they took him. How many mortals do you know that could withstand those thirteen Druids by will alone? You knew them well. You know their power. Yet you would subject him to the trial by blood the council has called for? You would kill every person this man cares for to test him? If you destroy his entire line for this, who then will renegotiate The Compact?"

"Perhaps we shall live without it," she said lightly, but he saw the merest hint of unease in her lovely, inhuman eyes.

"You would risk that? Our worlds colliding? Shall human and Tuatha Dé Danaan live together again? The Keltar have broken their oath, but we have not yet violated our end of it. The moment we do, The Compact will be void and the

walls between our realms will crumble. Trial by blood will force us to share the earth, my queen. Is that what you want?"

"He's right," her consort stirred himself to speak. "Did the council consider that?"

If Adam knew the council half as well as he thought he did, yes. There were those on the high council who missed the old ways. Those who thrived on chaos and petty machinations. Fortunately, they did not include his queen. With the exception of whimsical entertainment, she disdained humans and had little desire to see them walking in her world again.

Silence shrouded the court.

Aoibheal templed slender fingers and rested her dainty chin upon them. "Interest me. Are you suggesting an alternative?"

"An order of Druids in Britain, descendants of those you scattered millennia past, has been awaiting the return of the Draghar; they have plans to force the Keltar's transformation. If they succeed, do what you wish with him. Let that be his test."

"Are you presenting a formal plea for his life, Amadan?" Aoibheal purred, her iridescent gaze shimmering with sudden intensity.

She'd spoken part of his true name. A subtle warning. Adam stared off into the distance for time uncounted. Dageus MacKeltar meant nothing to him. Yet he had a relentless fascination with mortals, indeed, spent most of his time among them in some form, to some degree. Yes, his race had power, but mortals had another kind of power, an entirely unpredictable one: Love. And once, long ago—almost unheard of among his kind—with a mortal woman, he'd felt it.

Had sired a half-mortal son.

Though he'd long endeavored to, he'd not forgotten those brief years with Morganna. Morganna who'd refused his offer of immortality.

He glanced at his queen. She would exact a price should he lodge a formal plea for a mortal's life.

It would be a heinous price.

Then again, he thought, with a shrug of immortal ennui, eternity had been placid of late. "Yes, my queen," he said, tossing his hair back and smiling coolly when the court gasped collectively. "I am."

The queen's smile was as terrifying as it was beautiful. "I shall name your price when the Keltar's test has been met."

"And I shall bide your law, given this boon: Should the Keltar best the sect of the Draghar, the thirteen will be reclaimed and destroyed."

"You would barter with me?" A faint note of incredulity laced her voice.

"I barter for the peace of both our races. Lay them to rest. Four thousand years was long enough."

What could only be called a very human smirk crossed the queen's delicate features. "They wanted immortality. I merely gave it to them." She cocked her head. "Shall we wager upon the outcome?"

"Yes, I wager he'll lose," Adam said rapid-fire. There it was, what he'd been waiting for. The queen was the most powerful creature of their race.

And hated to lose. Though she would not raise a hand to help him, at least now, she would not raise her hand to harm him.

"Oh, you'll pay, Amadan. For that, you'll pay dearly."

Of that, he had no doubt.

Chapter 17

"Stop *peering* at me like that," Dageus hissed.

"What?" Silvan bristled. "I'm not allowed to look at my own son?"

"You're looking at me as if you're expecting me to sprout wings, a forked tail, and cloven hooves." No matter that he was feeling as if he might. Since the moment he'd come through the stones, since the moment the thirteen had found their voices, he'd known that the battle betwixt them had moved into a new and much more dangerous arena. The ancients within him had been fed pure power when he'd opened the bridge through time.

With an immense effort of will, he shuttered, closed, tightened himself and projected pretense that all was well and fine. Using magic to conceal his darkness was an egregious error and he knew it, feeding precisely that which he endeavored to hide, but he had to do it. He dare not let Silvan see him dearly at the moment. He needed to search the Keltar library and if Silvan felt him now, God only knew what he'd do. Certainly not wave him into the inner sanctum of Keltar lore.

Silvan looked startled. "Is shape-shifting one of their arts?" he inquired, evincing utter fascination.

Typical Silvan, Dageus thought darkly, curiosity exceeding caution. He'd worried a time or two that Silvan might one day be tempted to dabble in black arts himself, out of naught more than driving curiosity. His father and Chloe shared that, an insatiable need to know.

"Nay. And you're still doing it," Dageus said coldly.

"I'm merely curious about the extent of your power." Silvan sniffed, affecting an unassuming expression. With such piercing intellect in his gaze, it was far from convincing.

"Well doona be. And doona be poking at it." Och, aye, the ancients inside him were growing more aggressive. Sensing Silvan's power, they were trying to reach for it. For *him*. Silvan was far richer fodder than Drustan; he'd always had

a stronger center than his sons.

His father was also adept at the art of deep-listening that Dageus had never managed to perfect, a meditative regard that peeled away lies, exposing the bare bones of truth. 'Twas why the hopelessness he'd glimpsed in his da's gaze the eve he'd fled had fashed him so. He'd been afraid Silvan had seen something he himself couldn't see, and wouldn't want to.

And it was why, now, he was using all his will both to keep them in, and his father out.

"I ken it, lad," Silvan said, sounding suddenly weary. "You've changed since last I saw you."

Dageus said nothing. He'd managed to avoid looking directly into his father's gaze since the moment Chloe had fainted, taking only cursory glances. Betwixt the heightened awareness of the thirteen and the sexual storm that was raging hot and unsated inside him, he wasn't about to look him in the eyes.

When he'd carried Chloe abovestairs to his bedchamber, tucked her into bed, and whispered a soft sleep spell over her so she would rest easy through the night, Silvan had followed him and Dageus had felt his measuring regard hammering at the back of his skull.

He'd nearly not been able to let go of her. And though he'd not look at his father, he'd been grateful for his presence, for it had made short work of the dark thoughts he'd been having about bringing her only partially awake and—

"Look at me, son," Silvan said, his low voice implacable.

Dageus turned slowly, careful not to meet his gaze. He took measured breaths, one after another.

His father was standing in front of the hearth, his hands buried in the folds of his cobalt robe. In the soft light of dozens of tapers and oil globes, his white hair was a halo about his wrinkled face. Dageus knew the origin of each line. The grooves in his cheeks had appeared shortly after their mother had died, when he and Drustan had been lads of fifteen. The wide creases on his forehead had been worn into his skin by a constant raising of his brows as he pondered the mysteries of the world and the stars beyond it. The lines bracketing his mouth

were from smiling or frowning, never weeping. Stoic bastard, Dageus thought suddenly. No one wept in Castle Keltar. No one knew how. Except mayhap Silvan's second wife and Dageus's next-mother, Nell.

The lines feathering Silvan's deep brown eyes, winging upward at the outer edges, were from squinting in low light as he labored over his work. Silvan was a fine scribe, possessing an enviably steady hand, and had devoted himself to recopying, with exquisitely embellished carpet pages, the older tomes whose ink had faded o'er time.

When he'd been a lad, Dageus had thought his da had the wisest eyes he'd ever seen, full of special, secret knowledge. He realized he still thought that. His da had never been toppled from his pedestal.

His gut clenched. Mayhap Silvan had never fallen, but *he* certainly had. "Go ahead, Da," he said tightly. "Roar at me. Tell me how I failed you. Tell me how I've been naught but a disappointment. Remind me of my oaths. Throw me out if you're of a mind to, for I've no time to waste."

Silvan's head jerked in sharp negation.

"Tell me, Da. Tell me how Drustan never would have done such a thing. Tell me how—"

"You truly wish me to be telling you that your brother is less of a man than you?" Silvan cut him off, his voice low and carefully measured. "You need to be hearing me say that?"

Dageus stopped speaking, his mouth ajar. "What?" he hissed. "My brother is no' less of a—"

"You gave your life for your brother, Dageus. And you ask your father to condemn you for that?" Silvan's voice broke on the words.

Much to Dageus's horror, his da crumpled. His shoulders bowed and his lean frame jerked. Suddenly his eyes were glistening with tears.

Och, Christ. Dageus cursed silently, bearing down hard on himself. He dare not weep. No cracks. Cracks could become crevices and crevices canyons. Canyons a man could get lost in.

"I thought I'd never see you again." Silvan's words echoed starkly in the stone hall.

"Da," he said roughly, "yell at me. Berate me. For the love of Christ, *scream* at me."

"I can't." Silvan's wrinkled cheeks were wet with tears. He skirted the table and grabbed him, hugging him fiercely, pounding him on the back.

And weeping.

If Dageus lived to be a hundred, he never wanted to see his father weep again.

It was some time later, after Nell had appeared and the whole awful matter of tears had been repeated, after she'd bustled about preparing a light repast, after she'd retired again to check on his wee brothers, that the conversation turned to the grim purpose of why he'd returned.

Speaking in brisk, detached tones, Dageus updated Silvan on all that had transpired since last he'd seen him. He told him how he'd gone to America, and searched the texts, only to finally admit that he was going to have to ask Drustan for help. He told him of the strange attack on Chloe, and of the Draghar. He told him they'd discovered the texts about the Tuatha Dé Danaan had disappeared, and that it seemed intentional.

Silvan frowned at that. "Tell me, lad, did Drustan check beneath the slab?"

"Beneath the slab in the tower? The one on which he slumbered?"

"Aye," Silvan said. "Though to date I've put but two texts there, I've been planning to find aught I could that may be of help and seal them away beneath it. In anticipation of that, I left clear instructions for Drustan to look there."

Dageus dosed his eyes and shook his head. Had this trip been unnecessary? Might he have avoided all of it? Probably. In a few more years, it was quite likely that Silvan would have gathered up every tome he'd been searching for and tucked them beneath the slab. They'd been there in the twenty-first century the whole time.

"Where were the instructions? In the letter you left for him?"

"Aye."

"The same letter in which you told him what I'd done?"

Silvan nodded again.

"Did you spell it out, or say something cryptic, Da?" Knowing his father, it had been cryptic.

Silvan scowled. "I said, 'I left some things for you beneath the slab,' " he replied peevishly. "How much clearer must a man be?"

"Much more, because apparently Drustan never looked. 'Tis my guess he was so distraught by the news your missive contained, that he crumpled the letter and threw it away. From the way you worded it, like as not, he thought you'd left mementos or some such trifles."

Silvan looked sheepish. "I hadn't thought of that."

"You said you've been searching the tomes. Have you discovered anything yet?"

A wary expression flickered across his father's features. "Aye, I've been looking, but 'tis slow work. The older texts are much more difficult to read. There was no uniformity of spelling, and oftentimes they had little grasp of the alphabet."

"What about—"

"Enough about the texts for now," Silvan cut him off. "There'll be time enough on the morrow. Tell me of your lass, son. I must confess, I was surprised to see you'd brought a wee woman with you."

Dageus's heartbeat quickened and his veins were filled with that peculiar icy heat. His lass. His.

"Though she seemed to be having a hard time fathoming your use of the stones as a bridge betwixt the centuries, I sensed a strong will and fiery mind. I suspect she'll come around without too much fuss," Silvan mused.

" 'Tis my belief as well."

"You haven't told her what's wrong with you, have you?"

"Nay. And doona be telling her. I'll tell her when the time is right." As if there would ever be a "right" time. Time was his enemy now as never before.

A silence fell then. An awkward, ponderous silence filled with questions but too few answers, rife with unspoken worries.

"Och, son," Silvan said finally, "it was killing me, not knowing what had become of you. 'Tis glad I am you've returned. We'll find a way. I promise."

Later, Silvan pondered that promise ruefully. He paced, he grumbled, he cursed.

Only after Dageus had retired abovestairs and the wee hours of the morn had filled his weary bones with disenchantment—by Amergin, he was three score and five, too old for such doings—did he admit that by now, he should have *something* to show for his work. He'd not been entirely forthright with Dageus.

He'd been devouring the old texts since the night Dageus had confessed and fled. Oddly, though he'd damn near torn the castle apart, he couldn't find any documents predating the first century. And he *knew* they'd once had many. They were referenced in many of his texts in the tower library.

Yet he couldn't find the bletherin' things, and granted the castle was enormous, but one would think one could keep track of one's own library!

According to the legends, they even had the original Compact that had been sealed betwixt the race of man and fairy. Somewhere. God only knew where. How could they not know?

Because, he answered himself wryly, when so much time passes that a tale becomes far removed from its origination, it loses much of its reality.

Though he'd dutifully told his sons the Keltar legends, he'd privately thought that the tales from millennia past were *surely* embellished a bit, possibly a fabricated creation-myth of sorts, to explain away the Keltar's unusual abilities. Though he'd obeyed his oaths, a part of his mind had never fully believed. His daily purposes had been purpose enough: the Druid rituals marking the seasons, the care of the villagers in Balanoch, the education of his sons and his own studies. He hadn't needed to believe all the rest of it.

The sad truth was, not even *he'd* really believed there was some ancient evil in

the in-between.

How much we've forgotten and lost, he brooded. He'd scarce given thought to the legendary race that had allegedly set the Keltar on their course. Not until his son had gone and broken his oath, thus violating an alleged Compact whose existence had become far more myth than reality.

Well, he brooded darkly, *now at least we know the old legends are true*.

Little comfort, that.

Nay, his search had failed to unearth even an iota of useful information. Indeed, he'd begun to fear that the Keltar had been unforgivably careless in their guardianship of the old lore, that Dageus's broken oath was merely one more failing in a long list of failings.

He suspected they'd quit believing centuries ago, pushing away the mantle of a power that exacted too high a price. For generations, the Keltar men had been growing increasingly morose, weary of protecting the secret of the stones, weary of hiding away in the hills and being regarded with fear. Weary of being so damned different.

As the dark ages gave way to lighter ones, so, too, did the Keltar seem to wish to lay down the burden of their past.

His son thought he had failed, but Silvan knew better. They'd *all* failed.

On the morrow they would sit down with the ancient writings and search anew. Silvan hadn't the heart to tell his son that he'd nearly finished searching, and if there was some answer to be found in them, he was too dense to discern it.

His eyes narrowed and his thoughts turned to the wee lass his son had brought with him. When the storm had wakened him—a storm the likes of which he'd heard but a few times before—he'd rushed outside, praying'twas Dageus returning.

It had taken some time for the fog to clear, and though he'd called out, Dageus had not replied.

When the fog had lifted, Silvan had understood why.

In Silvan's estimation, 'twas the lass that might yet prove to be their finest hope. For so long as his son loved her—and he did, though he knew it not himself—well, evil didn't love. Evil tried to seduce and possess and conquer, but it didn't *feel* for the object of its desire. So long as love was alive in Dageus, they had a toehold, however small.

Och, he and the lass were going to become dose, Silvan decided. She was going to learn about the young Dageus who'd once strolled these heathery hills, nurturing the earth and healing the wee beasties, the gentle Dageus with the wild heart. He and Nellie would see to it. Dageus's gifts had always leaned toward the healing arts, and now he was in need of healing himself.

If the lass didn't already love his son—he'd not had sufficient chance to probe her—he would do all in his power to win her for him.

Doona poke at them, Dageus had warned him bitterly, meaning the ancient evil within him.

But Silvan had poked. Silvan *always* poked. And despite the barriers his son had erected, buffering it a bit, it had poked back and Silvan was, quite simply, horrified by what was growing inside Dageus.

Chapter 18

"I know I'm dreaming," Chloe announced conversationally the next morning as she descended the stairs to the great hall. She slipped into a chair, joining Silvan, Dageus, and a woman she'd not yet met—er, dreamed about—for breakfast.

Three pairs of eyes regarded her expectantly and, heartened by the attention, she continued.

"I know I didn't just use the equivalent of a little outhouse upstairs in a closet." With straw for toilet paper, no less. "And I know I'm not really wearing a gown, and I'm certainly not wearing"—she peered down at her toes—"beribboned little satin slippers." Straightening in her chair, she scooped a spoon of jam from a dish. "And I know this strawberry jam is just a figment of—*eww*—what *is* this?" Her lips puckered.

"Tomato preserves, m'dear," the man who'd been identified to her earlier in the dream as Silvan replied mildly, with a smile he tried to hide.

Not good, Chloe thought. In a dream, the dreamer controlled how things tasted. She'd been thinking sweet strawberry jam and gotten a nasty, unsweetened vegetable. More proof, she thought dismally, as if she'd needed it. She glanced about the table for something to drink.

Dageus slid a mug of creamy milk across the table to her.

She drank deeply, peeking at him over the rim. She'd had erotic dreams about him all night. Frighteningly intense dreams in which he took her in every way it was possible for a man to take a woman. And she'd loved every minute of it, had awakened feeling all soft and kittenish, nearly purring. His black hair was pulled back from his sculpted face in a loose braid. He wore an unlaced linen shirt that revealed a sinful expanse of golden, muscled chest. Big, beautiful man. Sexy, scary man.

Chloe wasn't stupid. She knew she wasn't dreaming. A part of her had acknowledged it last night or she wouldn't have fainted. That, in a strange way, seemed proof itself: a dreaming mind fainting from the "reality" of its own dream? An already unconscious mind slipping into unconsciousness? She could

get tangled up in that thought if she pondered it too long.

Upon awakening this morning, she'd wandered the upper floor, scurrying down corridors, peeking into chambers and out windows, piecing together bits of information. She'd touched, peered, shaken, even broken a few minor things that she'd deemed replaceable as part of her examination.

All of it, the textures and scents and tastes were simply too tangible to be a figment of her unconscious mind. Furthermore, dreams had narrow focuses; they didn't come complete with periphery guards and servants going about duties she'd never conceived of, beyond the windows.

She was in Maggie MacKeltar's castle... but not quite that castle. There were additions missing, an entire wing not yet constructed. Furniture that hadn't been there yesterday, more furniture that was missing today, to say nothing of all the new people! To all appearances—impossible though it was to fathom—it was Maggie's castle nearly five centuries ago.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" She slid Dageus's mug back and glanced curiously at the older, fortyish woman. She couldn't be his mother, she mused, unless she'd had him incredibly young, even for medieval times. Dressed in a lapis gown similar to her own, the lovely woman had a gently faded but timeless beauty. Her ash-blond hair was swept up in an intricate plait, with fringy bangs wisping about her face, rather like Gwen's, Chloe thought.

" 'Tis your dream, lass. Make up her name yourself," Dageus said, watching her with a mocking expression.

He knew she knew. Damn the man.

"Oh, Dageus," Chloe sighed, slumping in her chair, " *what* did you do to me? I thought you were just a wealthy, eccentric womanizer. Well, I also thought you were a thief for a while," she muttered, "and a kidnapper, but I didn't think—"

"Would you like to see the library, lass?" he offered, his dark eyes glittering.

Chloe narrowed her eyes. "You think it's going to be that easy? Show the girl a few impressive books and she'll think it's all right that you somehow yanked her back in time?" Sadly, she mused, he might be onto something, because the instant he'd said "library" her heart rate had quickened. A zillion questions

perched on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't yet bring herself to talk about reality as if it were real.

"All right, then. Let's go to the stones. I'll send you back this very moment." He pushed himself to his feet and she got her first look at him from the waist down. Snug black leather trews encased his powerful hips and thighs. Holy cow. Her mouth went dry. There was an impossible-to-ignore bulge in them.

"Wait just a—" Silvan began, but stopped abruptly at Dageus's warning look.

"You know you're not dreaming," Dageus said flatly.

Chloe forced herself to tear her gaze away from his lower body and pursed her lips.

"Then come. I'll send you back." Dageus gestured impatiently at her.

Chloe remained seated. She wasn't going anywhere. "Are you saying that you could send me back any time?"

"Aye, lass. 'Tis naught more than a bit of physics your century hasn't yet stumbled upon for themselves." His tone was detached, as if discussing nothing of any more significance than a new bit of twenty-first century technology.

"Though from what I read while in your time," he continued, "I'd wager it won't be much longer." When she made no reply, he said, "Chloe, Druids have long possessed more knowledge of archaeoastronomy and sacred mathematics than anyone. Did you truly believe yours was the most advanced civilization ever to have existed? That none came before? Consider the Romans and the subsequent Dark Ages. Think you Rome was the first great civilization to rise and fall? Knowledge has repeatedly been gained and lost, to be one day regained again. Druids have merely managed to hold onto their lore through the dark times."

A plausible, albeit mind-boggling possibility, she conceded silently. It certainly explained the purpose of all those mysterious stone monuments that stumped modern man, many of them constructed as early as 3500 B.C.E. Historians couldn't even agree on *how* the ancient monuments had been built. Was it conceivable that thousands of years ago a race or tribe had lived that had achieved an advanced understanding of physics, necessary to both construct those "devices" and use them?

Yes, she acknowledged, awed. It was conceivable.

He'd said "Druids," as in *he* was a Druid. So, she mused wryly, the tricky man had actually told her the truth back in his Manhattan penthouse. She'd simply not believed it.

She'd studied Druids as part of her course work in the master's program. She'd waded through the scant facts and stranger fictions. What was it Caesar had written in the first century C.E. during the Gallic War? *Druids have much knowledge of the stars and their motion, of the size of the world and of the earth, of natural philosophy, and of the powers and spheres of action of the immortal gods.*

Caesar himself had said it. Who was she to argue?

Pliny, Tacitus, Lucan, and many other classical writers had also written about the Druids. The Romans had persecuted the Druids for centuries (while their emperors privately availed themselves of their prophetesses), forcing them into hiding. Christianity had further forced them to adapt or disappear. Had it been because they'd feared the power the Druids possessed? Were Druids perhaps like the Templars? Hiding throughout the centuries, protecting fabulous secrets?

She was starting to feel light-headed again, dizzy by the possibility that all those myths and legends carefully scribed in Ireland thousands of years ago were true. When the truth was so fantastical—why bother hiding it? Who would ever believe it? Nobody but a girl who'd gotten herself all wrapped up in it. A girl who'd stood in an ancient circle of stones and felt a gate or portal or whatever it was, open around her.

"Come, lass," Dageus interrupted her thoughts. "I'll return you and you can forget all about me. You may keep your artifacts. I release you from your obligations. Go home to New York. Have a nice life," he added coolly.

"Oh!" Chloe snapped, leaping to her feet. "You are *so* cold. And you certainly managed to pick up your share of modern colloquialisms, didn't you? Have a nice life, my ass. Do you really think I'm not in this up to my ears now? Do you really think that if I'm in sixteenth-century Scotland I'm letting you send me away?"

His smile was chillingly predatory, carnal and possessive. "Do you really think I brought you this far to be letting you go, Chloe-lass?"

Chloe had a sudden urge to fan herself. He *knew* her, she realized. He'd learned a bit about what made her tick. If, when she'd come downstairs pretending it was a dream, he'd coddled her, she might have trundled back upstairs and tried to convince herself that if she went back to sleep everything would be okay.

Instead, he'd pushed her, threatened to send her away, knowing she had a mile-wide stubborn streak and would fight to remain.

"I'm *really* in the sixteenth century?"

Three people said "aye" with calm assurance.

"And I haven't gone crazy?"

Three firm "nays."

"And you could really send me back that easily? Any time I wish?"

"Aye, lass. 'Tis that easy. Though I would endeavor to talk you out of it."

She'd come to know him a little, too, what made him tick. And from the deceptive gentleness of his voice and the look on his face, she knew he'd tie her to the bed again if she tried to leave, not attempt reason. She peered at him intently. He was still. Implacable. Hands fisted at his sides.

He *cared* about her. She had no idea how much of it was just that mind-boggling attraction between them, but it was a start. And he obviously had a high opinion of her, if he'd thought she could handle this. She felt a little flush of pride. No, she wasn't going anywhere.

However, he owed her some *serious* explanations.

Oh, for heaven's sake, she thought with droll exasperation, *this certainly explains a lot. It's no wonder I haven't been able to keep my hands off the blasted man since the day I met him. He's an artifact! A Celtic one at that!*

"Well, that's one way of thinking of me, lass," Dageus purred, his dark eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

"Tell me I didn't just say that aloud!" Chloe was horrified.

Silvan cleared his throat. "You did. He's an artifact."

Chloe groaned, wishing she could just sink into the floor and be swallowed up.

"I'm Silvan's wife, Nell, by the bye," the pretty fortyish woman said. "Dageus's next-mother. Would ye be liking some kippers and tatties, lass?"

She decided next-mother must be the medieval equivalent of second wife. "It's, er, very nice t-to meet you. And yes, I would," Chloe stammered, sinking limply down into her chair.

Only then did Dageus reclaim his seat. He was staring at her intensely, his gaze full of sensual promise. She shivered. His expression couldn't have said any more dearly that Chloe Zanders had kept her virginity quite long enough.

"You look lovely this morn, lass," he said silkily, as he passed her first a platter of potatoes and eggs, then one of fat wedges of ham and kippers. "I fancy you in a gown."

His eyes added that he knew there'd been nothing to put beneath it when she'd gotten dressed, intimating that he was the one who'd chosen her gown and brought it to her room while she'd slept.

Her erotic awareness of the man—an eleven on a scale of one to ten—rocketed to a twenty. Chloe took a deep breath, managed a "thank-you" and turned her attention toward something tangible to tackle: food.

Simon Barton-Drew's face was grim as he replaced the phone in the cradle.

Trevor hadn't phoned in for fourteen hours. Simon had been trying to reach him on his cell since early that morning, with no success.

And that could mean only one thing.

Scowling, he kicked a chair across the room. Trevor had better be dead, he brooded.

Stalking to the outer door of his office, he swiftly locked it. Before dosing the blinds, he glanced out at the rain-slicked street. With the exception of a mangy

alley cat noisily wrestling a bit of trash from a nearby Dumpster, the area was deserted, the street lamps buzzing as they flickered on. As much time as he spent in the dilapidated Belthew Building on Morgan Street in a seedy section on London's outskirts, Simon felt more at home there than in the elegant brownstone where his wife had stopped waiting dinner for him twenty years ago.

The land on which The Belthew Building stood had been owned by the Druid sect of the Draghar for centuries. Constructed above ancient labyrinthine crypts, it had served as their headquarters for nearly a millennia, in various incarnations. Once an apothecary, then a bookstore specializing in rare books, then a butcher's shop, once even a brothel, it now housed a small printing business that drew little notice, and there was no paper trail connecting it to the powerful Triton Corporation.

Their members were the elite, well-placed in society, many in government, more still in the upper echelons of large holding companies. They were wealthy, learned men with impeccable pedigrees.

And they would be furious to know that he'd lost contact with Trevor. Though Simon was Master of the Order, he was nonetheless accountable. Highly accountable, in this sensitive time. His followers had not funneled so much money and time into the sect for anything less than the promise of absolute power. They all possessed a certain degree of ruthlessness that would come to the fore should they think him incapable of controlling his minions.

Flipping off the lights, he moved through his darkened office by rote. He removed a painting mounted on one of the many recessed wood panels of the wall and typed in a sequence of numbers. He replaced the painting and, as the paneling slid up behind his desk, he opened a second door and strode down a narrow hallway.

Several minutes and several additional complex passkeys later, he entered a passageway that sloped sharply downward, where it met a precipitous fall of worn stone stairs. When he reached the bottom, he turned and took the next flight, then a third, then hurried through a maze of dimly lit, damp tunnels.

He had to send someone to Inverness to discover if Trevor had been taken alive. And if so—to tidy up. It would require the most loyal and committed men he had. Men who would never let themselves be taken alive. Men who would die

for him without hesitation. The best men he had.

His sons were where they could nearly always be found, in the electronic heart of their operation, monitoring innumerable facets of their business. And they were, as always, eager to serve.

After breakfast, Dageus asked Nell to take Chloe to find a light cloak suitable for her to ride in. Chloe, her inquisitive gaze darting everywhere, allowed herself to be led from the great hall.

After the women departed, Silvan arched an inquiring brow. "Doona you wish to be starting with the texts, lad?"

Dageus shook his head. "I need this day. I need to show Chloe my world, Da. What it was like. What I was like. If only for a day." That wasn't exactly the truth. The truth was the night had been hellish and the morn wasn't getting any better. He'd not been able to sleep, strung tight as a corded bow. He'd passed the time till dawn fantasizing about Chloe and all the ways he would seduce her. He'd scarce maintained his tight facade of calm through breakfast. And when Chloe had admitted what a battle she'd been fighting to keep her hands off him, it had been all he could do not to toss her over his shoulder and drag her off to his bed.

He'd studied himself in a small mirror this morn, while shaving with a hand that shook more than was safe when a man had an open blade at his own neck. He'd seen eyes a darker shade of brown. He'd been nigh a sennight without a woman. Too long. Far too long.

How long, he wondered almost idly, till his eyes would turn full black? Another day, mayhap two? And what would happen then? he mused, a part of him afraid, another part of him aware that he wasn't as afraid as he ought to be.

The voices yestreen in the stones had caught him by surprise. 'Twas the first time he'd ever heard the beings inside him speak, the first time he'd ever perceived them as individual entities. And though feeling them so intensely had been horrifying, had made him feel as if he were choking on some dead thing in the back of his throat that he couldn't scrape out, it had also been... intriguing.

Part of him was curious to know their language, to hear what they might say. He

had thirteen ancient beings inside him! What might they tell him of ancient history? Of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, and what the world had been like four thousand years ago? Of what it was like to hold so much power...

Inviting *a dialogue with them would be your first step through the gates of hell*, his honor hissed.

Aye, he knew that.

You can't trust a thing they might say!

Still...

No "*still*" about it, his honor seethed. *I doona care who you fuck today, just do it.*

That jarred him a bit.

It would be Chloe. If he went to another woman—even if only out of deference to her, to spare her his brutal need—and she found out, she would never have him. Things could get very bad, very fast, then. He was afraid that if he went to her and she denied him, he might force her. He didn't want to do that to Chloe. He didn't want to hurt Chloe.

The antithesis of his honor scoffed: *So what? If she doesn't care for something you do, use the Voice of Power on her. Tell her to forget what she may not like. Tell her she adores you, worships you. You need but tell her she loves you to make it so. 'Tis so easy. The world can be anything you want it—*

"*Dageus!*" Silvan shouted, slamming his fists down on the table in front of him.

Dageus jerked and stared at his father.

"Where were you?" Silvan exclaimed, looking both frightened and furious.

"Right here," Dageus said, shaking his head. A soft whisper, a rustle stirred inside him. Faint voices murmured.

"I shouted your name three times, and you dinna so much as blink a lash," Silvan snapped. "What were you doing?"

"I... I was merely thinking."

Silvan regarded him intensely for a strained moment. "You had the strangest look on your face, son," he said finally.

Dageus didn't want to know what kind of look. "I'm fine, Da," he said, pushing himself from the table. "I doona know how late we'll be. Doona wait a meal for us."

Silvan's piercing gaze followed him as he walked away.

Nell placed two mugs of cocoa (one specially supplemented with herbs for an absent-minded man who too oft forgot to eat) on a tray and went in search of her husband.

Her husband. The words never failed to bring a smile to her lips. When Silvan had found her lying on the road nearly fifteen years ago, on the brink of death, he'd brought her back to Castle Keltar and sat at her bedside, demanding she fight for her life at a time when she'd wanted naught more than to die.

Before Silvan had found her, she'd been mistress to a married laird whom she'd loved unwisely and deeply, incurring the wrath and jealousy of his barren wife. While he'd lived, he'd been there to protect her, but when he'd been killed in a hunting accident, his wife had stolen Nell's babies, had her driven out, beaten and left for dead.

Upon recovering, for the next twelve years she'd been Silvan's housekeeper, caring for him and mothering his young sons in lieu of her own. Despite her firm resolve to never again get involved with a laird—wed or no'—she'd fallen in love with the eccentric, gentle, brilliant man. Verily, the day she'd opened her mud- and blood-caked eyes to find him bending over her in the roadway, something inexplicable had quickened inside her. She'd contented herself with loving him from a distance, hiding it behind a caustic demeanor and sparring words. Then three and a half years ago, events with Gwen and Drustan had thrown them together, stirring a passion that she'd been elated to discover Silvan had been hiding as well, and life had been sweeter than aught she'd ever known. Though nothing could replace the babies she'd lost so long ago, fate had blessed her in her late years with a second chance, and their twins were currently sleeping in the nursery under careful watch of their nanny, Maeve.

She loved Silvan more than life itself, though she rarely let him know that. There

was something stuck in her craw, a thing she'd never make peace with. Silvan hadn't given his first wife the binding Druid vows of mating. That had heartened her when he'd asked her to wed him, but in three and a half long years, he'd not offered them to her either. And so long as that distance was betwixt them, she would never be able to make completely free with her heart. She would always wonder why, always wonder how come he didn't love her enough. A woman hated knowing she loved her man more deeply than he loved her.

Silvan was, as she'd expected, in his tower library, one hundred and three steps above the castle proper.

He was also, as she'd expected, downright broody.

"I brought ye cocoa," she announced, placing the tray on a small table.

He glanced up and smiled at her, though with an utterly distracted air. For a change, there was no book on his lap. Nor was he seated at his desk, scribing away. Nay, he was in a chair near the open window and had been staring sightlessly out it.

" 'Tis Dageus, is it no?" Nell drew a chair close to his and sipped at her cocoa. Silvan had long had a fondness for the costly chocolate drink, and during her pregnancy she'd developed a taste for it herself. "Why dinna ye tell me all about it, Silvan," she encouraged gently. She knew what he was thinking, for she was worrying the same things. Dageus had always been her favorite of the Keltar lads, with his wild passionate heart and private pains. As she'd watched him grow, watched the world harden him, she'd prayed a special lass might someday come along for him, as Gwen had for Drustan. (Gwen who'd gotten the blethering binding vows from *her* husband!)

Silvan's brown eyes sobered and he raked a hand through his snowy mane. "Och, Nellie, what am I to do? What I felt in him six moons past, before he left, is naught compared to what I now sense."

"And there's naught in the tomes ye've been searching that tells how to reimprison them?"

Silvan shook his head and exhaled dismally. "Not a blethering thing."

"Have ye checked all the tomes?" she pressed. Since the day Dageus had left,

Silvan had been a man fair obsessed, laboring from dawn till dusk on his studies, determined to find something to pass on to Drustan, where they'd both suspected Dageus had gone.

Silvan replied that he'd thoroughly searched both his tower library and the study belowstairs.

"Did ye check the chamber library?" Nell asked, frowning.

"I told you I checked the study."

"I dinna say the study. I said the chamber library."

"What are you talking about, Nellie?"

"The one beneath the study."

Silvan went very still. "What one beneath the study?"

"The one behind the hearth," she said impatiently.

"*What* one behind the hearth?" Silvan snapped, surging to his feet.

Nell's eyes flew wide. "Och, for heaven's sake, Silvan, dinna ye know about it?"

Silvan grabbed her hand, his brown eyes flashing. "*Show me.*"

Chapter 19

Chloe clutched the stallion's mane as they sped across heather-covered fields toward a lush, overgrown forest.

When she and Dageus had ridden out from the castle half an hour ago, she'd seen more evidence that she was truly in the past. A towering wall that hadn't been there yesterday, patrolled by guards, encircled the perimeter of the estate. Clad in authentic medieval garb and armor, the guards had been toting weapons that made her fingers curl. She'd barely resisted the temptation to pluck them from their hands and lock them up somewhere safe.

When they'd exited the gates she'd peered curiously down into the valley, not really expecting to see the city of Alborath. Still, seeing the vast vale, that twenty-four hours earlier had been filled with thousands of homes and shops, currently occupied by contentedly *grazing*, fat sheep, had left her feeling utterly discombobulated.

Face it, Zanders, however he did it—physics, Druidry, archeoastronomy—he took you back.

Which meant that the man behind her on the horse, who'd not spoken a word since they'd ridden out, guiding them at a dizzying speed across wide-open fields, was a man who possessed the knowledge to command time itself.

Wow. Not exactly what she'd expected the day she'd stood in his penthouse fantasizing about what kind of man Dageus MacKeltar might be. Nope, not once had she thought "time-travelling Druid." It was making her reevaluate her entire concept of history—how little historians really knew! She felt as if she'd been sucked into one of Joss Whedon's scripts, into a world where nothing was what it seemed. Where girls discovered they were vampire-slayers and fell for men who didn't have souls. A *Buffy* addict to the bone, she wondered who Dageus was more like, Spike or Angel?

The answer came with swift certainty: There was something about him that was far more Spike than Angel, a tortured duality, a driving, underlying darkness.

His grip was tight on her waist, almost painful, his body rigid behind hers. The

sheer size of him was daunting, being clutched between his powerful thighs, held tightly to his broad chest, made her feel delicate and overwhelmed. He seemed different in his own century, and she wondered how he'd ever passed as a twenty-first century man. He was all warrior and imperious command. His was regal Celtic blood, hot and passionate. He was man enough to swing the massive claymores that decorated the walls in The Cloisters. Man enough to survive, even thrive in such a rugged, untamed land.

She'd hardly noticed his silence when they'd first rode out, too fascinated by the vista, but now it was a chill wind behind her making her skin prickle.

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked nervously when he slowed the horse to a trot near a copse of rowan trees.

His reply was a soft, biting laugh as he shifted in the saddle so the hard thickness of him rubbed briefly against her bottom. Despite how nervous he was making her, lust filled her to a dizzying degree. There were questions, zillions of questions she should ask, and suddenly she couldn't recall a single one. Her mind had blanked alarmingly when he'd rubbed against her.

He reined in the stallion, dropped to the ground, and dragged her from its back. Off balance, she fell into his arms and he crushed her mouth with a hot, savage kiss.

Then he shoved her away, leaving her gasping for breath and clutching at air. She stood, watching with wide eyes as he grabbed a folded length of plaid from behind the saddle. Without a word he dropped it to the ground, spreading it with the toe of his boot. He slapped the stallion lightly on the rump, driving it away.

"I thought you told Silvan you were taking me to see a medieval village. What are you doing, Dageus?" she managed. She knew what he was doing. She could practically smell it on him—sex and lust and ruthless determination.

No matter that she was ready for him, she backed away a few steps. Couldn't help it. Then a few more. Tiny breaths slammed into each other, dotting in her throat. That danger she'd sensed in him so many times before had escalated to an extreme pitch.

His gaze was mocking. A strange flash of temper and impatience whipped

through his eyes. "You had your hand wrapped around my cock last eve, Chloe, and you want to know what I'm doing? What do you think I'm doing?" he purred with a baring of teeth that only a fool would term a smile.

Nostrils flaring, he stalked toward her and paced a slow circle around her. Stripping the thong from his hair, he raked his hands through the braid, freeing it. It spilled in waves of midnight around his body. *The beast is loose*, Chloe thought with a bone-melting surge of excitement. She pivoted slowly to keep pace with him. She was too nervous to allow him at her back.

He fisted a hand in his shirt behind his neck, yanked it over his head and flung it to the ground.

The air left her lungs in a great *whoosh of* breath. Dressed in nothing but black leather trews, hair falling about his savage face, he was forbiddingly beautiful. When he bent and stripped *off* his boots, the muscles in his powerful back and wide shoulders rippled, reminding her that he was twice her size, his arms were bands of steel, his body a meticulously honed machine.

Something *about him is different...*

It took her a few moments to understand what it was. For the first time, she was seeing him without his eternal reserve and icy control. His gestures were no longer smoothly executed. Standing there, legs splayed, he was pure male aggression, insolent and unleashed.

She was startled to realize she was panting softly. That big, rock-hard aggressive man who was coming unraveled was going to make love to her.

He paced two more silent circles around her—*oh, yes, there was a reckless masculine swagger in his walk*—then closed in on her, his hand working at the laces of his trews. He was regarding her with mocking, possessive amusement as if he sensed she verged on fleeing, knew he could outrun her, and rather hoped she'd try.

As his big hand undid the laces, her gaze was drawn there, down his rippling stomach to the bulge in his pants that was... quite large. And soon to be inside her.

"M-maybe we should do this really slow," she stammered. "Dageus, I think—"

"Hush," he snapped, as he freed himself from his treads.

Chloe closed her mouth, staring. The sight of him in leather pants half-undone, legs spread, hard body glistening gold in the sunlight, with his thick erection pushing hungrily up would be engraved in her memory until the end of time. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't even swallow. She sure as hell wasn't going to blink and miss a minute of it. Nearly six and a half feet of raw, pulsing man was standing there, his hot gaze raking her, as if he were contemplating which part of her to taste first. She simply stared, her heart hammering.

"You know I'm no' a good man," he said, his voice deceptively gentle, belying the steel beneath it. "I've made no excuses. I've given you no pretty lies. You came with me anyway. Doona pretend you doona know what I want and doona think to deny me. Twice now you've tried to go back. *There is no going back with me, Chloe-lass.*" He hissed the last words, his lips drawing away from his teeth. "You know what I want and you want it too. You want it just the way I'm about to give it to you."

Chloe's knees nearly buckled. Anticipation shivered through her. He was right. On all counts.

He stalked. "Hard, fast, deep. When I'm done, you'll know you're mine. And you'll never think of naysaying me again."

Another predatory step toward her.

She didn't even think about it, she just yielded to the instinct: her feet spun her about and she broke into a run. As if she *could* outrun him. As if she could outrun what she'd been trying to outrun since she'd met him—the reckless, terrifying intensity of her desire for him. As if she even wanted to. She wanted him more than was wise, more than was rational, more than was controllable.

Still, she ran, a final symbolic resistance and—a part of her knew—she ran because she *wanted* him to chase her. Thrilled with the knowledge that Dageus MacKeltar was running after her and when he caught her he was going to teach her all those things his eyes had been promising. All those things she wanted so desperately to know. She sped through the tall, thick grass and he actually let her run for a time, as if he, too, were enjoying the chase. Then he was on her, taking her down to the ground on her stomach beneath him. *Laughing* as he took her

down.

His laughter turned into a rough growl as he stretched his big hard body the full length of hers, his erection an iron bar prodding her behind through the fabric of her gown. She wriggled, panicked by the feel of how large he was, yet he gave no quarter, wrapping his arms tightly around her, pinning hers to her sides. He rubbed himself back and forth between the cleft of her bottom, growling in a language she couldn't understand.

Banding her arms with one of his, he slid a hand between her body and the ground and cupped the vee of her thighs. She cried out at the shatteringly intimate touch. Every nerve in her body awakened brutally to a sharp, hungry emptiness. Muscles deep inside her bore down on nothing, aching to be filled and soothed. His strange temper, his roughness, fed a desire in her she'd not known she had. To be taken, consumed by the man. Hard and fast and without words. Every bit as animal as she'd known he was the day she'd met him.

She *liked* the danger in him, she realized then. It stirred a reckless part of her she'd long denied, been a little afraid of it. The part of her that sometimes dreamed she was in The Cloisters at night and the alarm systems had failed, leaving all those glorious artifacts unprotected.

His weight was so heavy atop her she could scarcely breathe. When his lips grazed the back of her neck, she whimpered. When his teeth dosed on it in a little love-bite, she practically screamed. She was dizzyingly aroused, hot, achy, and needy. Then his big hand was on her face, a finger slipping between her lips and she sucked on it, willing to take and taste any part of him she could get. With his other hand he shoved the skirts of her gown up, his fingers ruthlessly probing her exposed soft folds, spreading the dampness, slipping and sliding. As the hard maleness of him prodded her bottom, he worked a finger inside her and thrust deeply.

Chloe cried out and pushed back against his hand. *Yes, oh, yes—that was what she needed!* Small broken sounds escaped her lips as he deftly slid a second finger in till he reached her virgin barrier. Gently, but relentlessly, he thrust through it, covering her bare neck and shoulders with searing, open-mouthed kisses interspersed with tiny bites. The pain was fleeting, a small tearing, swiftly surpassed by the pleasure of his fingers moving inside her, his mouth hot on her skin, his powerful body rippling against hers. He was her most private fantasy

come to life. She'd dreamed of this, him taking her as if there were no force on earth that could prevent it.

None could, she thought dimly. Since the moment she'd seen him she'd known it would come to this. It had never been a question of "if," it had always only been a question of where and when.

Then he was nudging, thick and hard as steel, against those soft, delicate folds and she made a small helpless sound of distress. She'd *seen* him. She knew what was coming, and didn't think she could take it.

"Shh," he crooned against her ear, thrusting forward.

"I can't," she half-sobbed, as he began to push inside her. The pressure of him trying to enter was too intense.

"Aye, you can."

"No!"

"Easy lass," he purred. He drew back out the small inch he'd gained, wrapped a hand around himself and tried again, slowly. Though she wanted desperately to have him inside her, her body resisted the intrusion. He was too big and she was simply too small. With a barely smothered oath he stopped again, then he was roughly bunching the thick folds of her gown into a wad beneath her pelvis, raising her bottom higher for him, at just such an angle.

Then his full weight was on her again. He curled one powerful arm around her shoulders, the other around her hips.

He rubbed himself back and forth between her legs until she was pushing wildly back against him. At this new angle she felt exposed and vulnerable, but knew it would make it easier for him to enter. When she was crying out incoherently, he pushed himself in slowly, easing inside, his breath hissing from between his teeth. She panted, struggling to accommodate the impaling thickness of him. Minutes inched by as he pushed deeper, taking every tiny bit her body yielded. Just when she was certain he'd seated himself to the hilt, that she had all of him, he pushed a final time with a rough sound, deeper still, and she made helpless mewling noises.

"I'm in you, lass," his voice was a deep burr against her ear. "I'm part of you now."

God, he'd been in her since the moment she'd seen him. A larcenous thief, he'd broken and entered *her*, claiming residence just beneath her skin. How had she lived without this? she wondered. Without this fierce, savage intimacy, without this big intense man inside her?

"I'm going to love you now, slow and sweet, but when you come, I'm going to fuck you the way I need to. The way I've been dreaming about since the moment I saw you."

She whimpered in reply, burning inside, desperate for him to move, to do as he promised. She wanted both: tenderness and wildness, man and animal.

"When you bent back inside your friend's car that day, Chloe, I wanted to be behind you, just like this. I wanted to slip your skirt up and fill you up with me. I wanted to carry you up to my penthouse and keep you in my bed and never let you go." He groaned, a soft rough, purring sound. "And, och, when I saw your legs sticking out from beneath my bed—" He broke off, abruptly switching to a language she couldn't understand, but the exotic dialect in his husky voice wove an erotic spell around her.

He withdrew slowly, filled her again, thrusting in long, slow strokes, nudging deep. The largeness of him stirred nerve endings in places she'd not known existed. She could feel her climax building with each sure thrust, yet the moment she was about to reach it, he withdrew, leaving her aching and nearly sobbing with frustrated desire.

He filled her almost lazily, purring in that strange language. He withdrew, inch by inch, with excruciating slowness, until she was gripping the grass in thick handfuls and ripping it from the ground. Till with each thrust she struggled to arch against him and take more of him, keep him inside her so she could gain her release. For a short time she thought it must be her fault it kept eluding her, or perhaps he was just too big, then she realized he was deliberately withholding it. His big hands on her hips, he was pressing her down when she tried to arch up, preventing her from controlling the pace or taking what she needed.

"Dageus... please!"

"Please what?" he purred against her ear.

"Let me come," she wailed.

He laughed huskily, his hand sliding between her pelvis and the bunched fabric beneath it, prodding at her folds, exposing her taut nub. He flicked a finger over it and she almost screamed. A heartbeat passed, then two. He flicked lightly again. "Is this what you want?" he said silkily. His touch was expert, tantalizing, torturing, not quite enough, meted out with the sure skill of a man who knew a woman's body as well as she did.

"Yes," she gasped.

"Do you need me, Chloe?" Another light pass of his finger.

"Yes!"

"Soon," he purred, "I'm going to taste you here." He brushed the pad of his thumb over the hard nub.

Chloe slammed the ground with her palms and squeezed her eyes shut. Those simple words had nearly—but not quite, damn it!—pushed her over the sweet edge.

He pressed his lips to her ear and whispered in a sultry, erotic voice, "Do you feel like you can't breathe without me inside you?"

"Yes," she sobbed, dimly aware that there was something *deja vu*-ish about his words.

"Ah, lass, that's what I needed to hear. 'Tis yours, then, aught you want from me." Cupping her face with his large palm he turned her head to the side and slanted his mouth over hers at the same moment he thrust deep and held, grinding his hips in circles against her bottom, pumping into her. As she arched back against him he tightened his arm around her waist and deepened the kiss, his tongue plunging in tempo with his lower body, both driving into her. The tension gripping her body suddenly exploded, flooding her with the most exquisite sensation she'd ever felt. It was different than what had happened on the plane; this was a deeper quake at the very core of her, immensely more intense, and she screamed his name as she came.

He continued the steady thrusting until she went limp beneath him, then he drew her hips up and back, raising her to her knees and drove into her, the heavy weight of his testicles slapping against her hot, aching skin. With each thrust she whimpered, unable to prevent the broken sounds spilling from her lips.

"Och, Christ, lass," he hissed. Rolling her with him onto his side, he wrapped his arms around her so tightly she could scarcely breathe, and thrust. And thrust, his hips flexing powerfully behind her.

He breathed her name when he came and the broken note in his voice, coupled with his hand moving so intimately between her legs brought her to another swift climax. When she peaked again it was so intense that the edges of darkness folded gently around her.

When she roused from the dreamy half-doze, he was still inside her. And still hard.

He took her to the village of Balanoch much later, which was actually a bustling little city. They ate in the central square, far from the shops on the outer perimeter that housed the smellier, noisier trades such as the tanneries, the smiths, and the butchers. Chloe was famished and ate with gusto strips of salted beef and fresh-baked bread, cheese, some kind of fruit tart, and spiced wine that went straight to her head, making her just tipsy enough that she couldn't keep her hands off him.

She saw things in the busy village that sealed beyond a shadow of a doubt—not that she'd really had any left—that she was in the past. The houses were wattle and daub, with tiny yards in which barefoot children played. The shops were constructed of stone with thatched roofs, their wide faces sporting shutters that opened horizontally, the bottom one displaying their wares. Beside the tanner's vats, she'd watched young lads shaving skins with currier's knives. At the blacksmith's forge, she'd stared in fascination at a strangely compelling smith while he pounded a long length of red-hot steel, sparks flying.

She'd peered in the single window of the goldsmith's abode and glimpsed books therein, at which point Dageus had threatened to toss her over his shoulder if she tarried overlong. When she'd started up the stairs, he'd backed her against the door and kissed her until she lost not only her breath, but all memory of where she'd been trying to go.

There were chandlers, weavers, potters, even an armorer and several kirks.

She couldn't help herself, she gaped, and a dozen times or more Dageus had gently closed her mouth with a finger beneath her chin. She lost count of how many times she muttered something inane like *Ohmigod*, I'm *really here*!

They didn't stay in Balanoch long, however, nowhere near long enough for Chloe to thoroughly explore; but frankly, she was more obsessed with exploring the big beautiful man who'd done things to her that made her feel as if she were coming apart at the seams.

They stopped several "leagues" as he called them, from the village, near a copse of oak trees, beside a tumbling stream that widened into a shimmering pool.

When he slid her from the stallion this time, his gaze was tender, his every touch a languid caress, as if wordlessly apologizing for his earlier roughness (which she hadn't minded a bit!). And when he took her again it was in the sun-warmed pool, after he'd gently washed those parts of her he'd battered. He went slow this time, giving her dozens of hot, wet, lazy kisses, lavishing her breasts with tiny nibbles and caresses. Lying her back at the edge of the pool, slipping between her legs and hooking her calves over his shoulders so he could taste her as he'd told her earlier he would. Lapping sweetly until she was wild for him, then dragging her back into the pool and lifting her astride him. She dung to him, staring into his eyes while he filled her and became part of her again.

And just before she drifted off in his arms, beyond replete, exhausted and sore in places that had never been sore before, she knew that she'd gone and done what she'd been determined not to do: She'd fallen head over heels for the strange, dark Highlander.

The moon was silvering the heather when Dageus finally stirred from his doze. He was sprawled on the plaid with Chloe in his arms, the lush curves of her plump backside pressed to his front, their legs twined together. Had he been a weeping man, he might have wept then from simple pleasure.

She'd taken him as he was. *All* of him. He'd been wild with the darkness goading him, beyond kindness, his humanity slipping, and she'd brought him back to himself. He'd tried to make it up to her with tender loving, slower and gentler than he'd ever taken a woman.

However he'd taken her, she'd met him and matched him. He'd been right, Chloe was wanton, had a wildness of her own. She'd been ready to lose her innocence, eager to be awakened, to be taught, and he'd relished every moment of it. Relished knowing he was her first lover. Her last, too, he thought possessively. She was a daring wee lass, loving every part of sex just as he'd known she would.

After they'd gone to Balanoch (which he'd scarce even seen, too consumed by the wee woman between his thighs on the horse), they'd lazily sunned themselves naked beside the tumbling brook that fed the pool. They'd run their hands over each other's body, learning every plane and curve. Tasting all the hollows and crevices. They'd shared more spiced wine and talked.

They'd *talked*.

She'd told him about her childhood, what it was like to grow up without parents. She'd made him laugh with stories of her elderly grandda warily taking her shopping for her first bra, (making him picture Silvan trying to choose female undergarments—och, that would be a sight!) and having The Talk with her about what she called "the birds and the bees." Try as he might, Dageus couldn't grasp that colloquialism. What birds and bees had to do with tooping, was beyond him. Horses he could understand. But bees? Unfathomable.

He'd spoken a bit about his childhood—the finer parts, growing up with Drustan, before he'd been old enough to know that the Keltars were feared, during those years he'd still harbored a young lad's dreams and fancies. He'd sung her bawdy, outrageous Scottish ditties as the sun had raced across the sky, and she'd laughed until tears filled her eyes. He was astonished by her every expression, so open and unguarded. Amazed by her resilience. Amazed by the emotions she stirred in him, feelings he'd long forgotten.

She'd asked him questions about Druidry and he'd told her of the myriad Keltar duties: performing the seasonal rituals on Yule, Beltane, Samhain, and Lughnassadh, tending the earth and the wee creatures, preserving and guarding the sacred lore, using the stones on certain necessary occasions. He'd also explained, as best he could, how the stones worked. The physics of it had flummoxed her, and when her eyes had begun to glaze over, he'd spared her further edification. He'd told her what little they knew about the Tuatha Dé, and how the Keltar had formed an alliance with them many thousands of years ago—

though he wisely avoided the subject of oaths.

So the Tuatha Dé really existed? she'd exclaimed. An actual race of technologically advanced people? Where did they come from? Do you know?

Nay, lass, we doona ken. There is very little we know about them for a certainty.

He'd known the precise moment she'd truly accepted it; her eyes had sparkled, her cheeks had flushed, and he'd half-feared she was going to rush right back to the stones to examine them further. He'd swift given her something else to examine.

Och, aye, his mate was wanton...

Strangely, she'd not brought up "the curse," nor had she pressed to know what he was searching for, and for that he was endlessly grateful. He had no doubt it was only a temporary reprieve and that she'd hammer him with questions before long, but he'd take what he could get. He sensed that she'd been as determined as he to steal a day with no worry for the morrow. 'Twas a gift he'd never expected her to give him, a gift that humbled him. If he had naught ever again, he'd had this day.

She knew he was a Druid, knew how ancient and strange his bloodline, and hadn't feared him. He'd shamelessly milked it for all it was worth and basked in her acceptance.

Now, as she slumbered in his arms, he nudged her a bit so the palm of his right hand slipped between her breasts, coming to rest above her heart. He shifted himself so the palm of his left rested above his own.

There were words he'd waited his entire life to say and he would not be denied them. Silvan had ever accused him of loving too much. If he did, he couldn't help it. Once his heart made the decision, there was no arguing with it. She was his mate and, for however long the gods granted, he would belong to his woman completely.

He kissed her till she stirred drowsily and murmured his name. 'Twould do him no good to say the vows whilst she slept; his mate must actually hear the words. Then he began speaking reverently, pledging himself to her forever, though the bond wouldn't take on its full life unless she one day gave the words back.

"If aught must be lost, 'twill be my honor for yours. If one must be forsaken, 'twill be my soul for yours. Should death come anon, 'twill be my life for yours."

He tightened his arm around her and drew a deep breath, knowing that what he was about to complete was irrevocable. She'd said no words of love to him (though she'd used it in a sentence once in Balanoch—she'd said she *loved* the way he made *love*—and had nearly caused his heart to stop beating). Completing the vow would seal him to loving her for all eternity, and if there were lives beyond this one, he would be bound to love her in those as well. In eternal torment, aching endlessly for her, if she never loved him back.

"*I am Given*," he murmured, holding her close. The moment he uttered the final words of the oath, a wave of intense emotion crashed over him. He couldn't begin to imagine what it might be like were she ever to give the vow back. Completion, he suspected. Two hearts made as one.

Deep inside him the ancient ones hissed furiously and recoiled. They hadn't liked that at all, he brooded darkly. Good.

"That was beautiful," Chloe murmured. "What was it?" She poked her head up and peered over her shoulder at him. In the pearly moonlight her skin shimmered translucent, her aquamarine eyes were sleepy and sexy, sparkling. Her lips were still swollen from his kisses, achingly lush. Her tousled curls fell in a tumble about her face and he could feel himself growing hard again, yet knew it would be the morrow at least before he could have her again. Were he a patient man, he should give her a sennight to recover. He'd be lucky if he made it a few more hours. Now that he'd tasted her, tasted how sweet it was to make love to a woman he loved, he was starved for more.

"Och, lass, you are so lovely. You fair take my breath away." Trite words, he scorned himself, such weak words compared to what he felt.

She flushed with pleasure. "Was that some kind of poem you recited?"

"Aye, something like that," he purred, rolling her over in his arms so she was facing him.

"I liked it. It sounded... romantic." She peered at him curiously, nibbling her lower lip. "What was it again?"

When he didn't repeat it, she mused a moment then said, "Oh! I think I've got it! You said 'if aught must be lost—' "

"Nay, lass," he shouted, going rigid. Och, Christ, what had he done? He dare not let her give the vows back. If aught happened to him, she would be bound to *him forever*. And if something terrible happened, if—God forbid—he actually turned dark, would she then be bound to him, a beast from hell? She might be tied for all eternity to the rage and fury that was the Draghar! Nay. Never.

Chloe blinked, looking wounded. "I just wanted to repeat it so I could remember it." The little poem had made her feel funny, strangely compelled to say it back for some reason. They were the sweetest words he'd ever spoken, even if only a bit of a poem, and she'd like it safely tucked away in her memory. He wasn't a man who bandied idle words about. He'd meant something by it. Was that how Dageus MacKeltar spoke of his feelings? By reciting a few lines of a poem?

Though she'd been drowsy when he'd spoken, she was pretty certain he'd said something like "my life for yours." If only he might love her like that! She no longer wanted merely to be the woman who got inside Dageus MacKeltar, she wanted to be the one who *stayed* inside him. Forever. The last woman he ever made love to. She wanted it so fiercely that the mere wanting was a kind of pain.

And by God, she wanted to hear those words again.

She opened her mouth to press, but the moment she did, he slanted his mouth hard over her parted lips and—damn the man for being able to kiss a woman into a swarm of hormones buzzing about like drunken little bees!—in a few moments the only thing she was thinking about was the way he was touching her.

Silvan wasn't a man given to lurking. Well, he hadn't been until his sons had gone and taken mates, then it seemed he'd begun doing all sorts of things he'd not done before. Like eavesdropping on an embarrassingly personal and sizzling conversation between Drustan and Gwen that had ended with Silvan dragging Nellie off to bed. And wed to her a short time later.

He grinned. A damn fine woman she was too. Knew more about the Keltar than the Keltar knew themselves. In her twelve years as his housekeeper, she'd learned nearly every secret in their castle, including one not even he had known: a secret place that had been forgotten for nearly eight centuries, according to the

last entry he'd read in the journal he'd found therein.

She said she'd discovered the underground chamber during a fit of spring cleaning a score of years ago. She'd not mentioned it because she thought he'd known—and *besides*, she'd added acerbically, *that was when ye weren't speaking to me*. Silvan snorted softly. What a fool he'd been, denying his desire for her. So many wasted years.

Are you wasting yet more time, old man? a caustic inner voice inquired. *Aren't there still things you refuse to say?*

He shoved that thought brusquely away. Now was not the time to brood on himself. Now was the time to focus on finding a way to save his son.

The contents of the chamber were the reason he currently lurked in the shadows of the great hall awaiting Dageus's return. There were texts and artifacts, relics Dageus needed to see. The sheer volume of material in the underground chamber was overwhelming. It could take them weeks simply to catalog it all.

Silvan sensed his son before he entered the great hall, and began to rise, but at the last moment before the door opened, he heard a soft rush of throaty female laughter. Then silence that could only be filled with kisses. Then more laughter.

Soft, faint, but *Dageus's* laughter.

He went motionless in a half-crouch above the chair. How long since he'd heard such a sound?

Och, the darkness was still there beneath it, but whatever had transpired this day had granted Dageus a merciful reprieve. He didn't need to see his son to know that his eyes would be—if not golden—at least lighter.

When his son swung the door open, Silvan slipped back into the chair, gathering the gloom around him with a few soft words.

His news would keep till the morn.

Chapter 20

There's something I haven't told you, Chloe-lass, Dageus said, stepping forward from the shadowy circle of stones. His eyes said he wanted to tell her. His eyes said he was afraid to tell her. What might such a man fear? That he feared it, frightened her as well, and diminished her need to know substantially. For a novel change, her curiosity curled up and played dead.

You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, she prevaricated, wanting the dreamy pleasure of their newfound intimacy to remain unspoiled by difficult truths. From the look on his face, difficult was a mild word for whatever he was withholding.

The tendons in his strong neck worked and he opened and closed his mouth several times. He took a deep breath. *Mayhap you should know—*

A sudden pounding at the door jarred Chloe instantly awake. Her dream shattered into tiny particles of sandman's dust.

When she jerked, Dageus's arms tightened around her.

"Are ye awake in there?" Nell was calling through the door. "Silvan's nigh beside himself with impatience. He's requestin' ye both belowstairs."

"We're awake, Nell," Dageus replied. "Would you mind having a bath sent up?"

"Dageus, yer da will get himself in a fankle. He's been waiting to show ye what he's found since early yestermorn and ye know he's ne'er been the most patient man."

Dageus exhaled loudly. "*A* quarter hour, Nell," he said, sounding resigned, "then we'll be down."

"I wouldn't be disturbin' ye, were it left to me." A soft laugh, and her footsteps faded down the corridor.

Dageus rolled Chloe over on her side to face him, capturing one of her legs between his, cupping her full breasts possessively.

"G'morning," she said drowsily, flushing from the memory of what he'd done to her through the night. What she'd encouraged him, even begged him to do. She smiled. She was achy and sore and felt scrumptious. She'd spent the entire night in his arms. Funny, she mused, of all the things that were so difficult to believe, the past twenty-four hours with him seemed the most astonishing. Since she'd given herself to him, he'd been a completely different man. Warm, sexy, playful. Oh, still every inch dominant, basely sexual man, but infinitely more approachable. Where, previously, sometimes it had seemed he was there but not quite there—a part of him somewhere else entirely—in bed he was one hundred percent *there*. One hundred percent focused and involved.

It was devastating to be the focal point of such raw, relentless eroticism. He was everything she'd fantasized

Dageus MacKeltar might be in bed and more. Wild and demanding, battering past all her inhibitions.

Just as she was thinking how nice it was to see him at ease, his body as relaxed as a lion lazily sunning himself, he smiled back, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Oooh! Stop that. When you smile at me I want all of it."

"What?" He looked confused.

Chloe slid her hands to his ribs, wondering if such a strong, disciplined man might be ticklish. He was, and it delighted her to discover that in some small way he was as helpless and as human as the rest of the world. She tickled mercilessly until, laughing, he captured her hands in his.

"I punish wenches who tickle me," he purred, stretching her arms above her head.

"How?" she asked breathlessly.

He ducked his dark head and caught one nipple in his mouth, suckling gently before releasing it and dragging his tongue over her breasts to capture the other. "You have perfect breasts, lass," he growled huskily. "As to the punishing, I'll need to think on that," he purred against her skin. "None has e'er tickled me before."

"Gee, I wonder why?" she managed. When he circled a budded nipple with his tongue, her back arched and she inhaled sharply. Her breasts felt swollen, chafed by his shadow beard, and exquisitely sensitive. "Could it be because you're always so reserved and in control? They were probably afraid to," she said, gasping.

He released her nipple and looked up at her, startled. "But you're not, are you, Chloe?"

"Smile," she panted, not wanting to answer that. Not wanting to admit that some part of her was afraid of the intimidating man who danced between centuries. Not exactly *of him*, more afraid of the power he had over her because she had such intense feelings for him. With all the scorching, incredibly intimate things he'd done to her, he'd not said any of those words lovers were wont to say, words hinting at a future together. As he'd told her yesterday, he made no excuses and offered no pretty lies. No promises either.

She wouldn't mind one or two. Or ten.

Taking her cue from him, she'd kept her feelings silent, resolved to be patient; wait and watch, try to catch some of those subtle little signs that were all Dageus ever revealed.

He arched a brow and smiled as she'd requested.

"Oh, that one was much better," she said, smiling back. It was impossible not to smile back when he truly smiled. When he slid his hands down her arms, over her breasts, then to her hips, she shook her head warily. "Huh-uh. I can't. Not now." She deliberately teased him with, "It could be a week before I can again." She topped it with a demure batting of her lashes.

Growling, he tossed his head, his black mane spilling like dark silk over her skin. "Och, nay, lass, I doona think so. A bath will hasten your recovery." He prodded her in the thigh, hard and ready. Did the man never tire? she wondered blissfully.

Despite her extreme soreness, desire flared, hot and greedy, stirring all those battered nerve endings to life. He made her feel insatiable. Having sex with him made a woman feel like she was doing something forbidden somehow, and she

could get downright obsessed with it. Though she felt bruised and tender, if they had the time, she'd be all over him, or rather, he'd be all over her, for he certainly liked the dominant position. "You heard Nell. We're not getting a bath. Silvan wants us." Chloe felt a sudden flush of embarrassment. She'd slept with Silvan's son in Silvan's castle. Though she hadn't felt awkward about it with Nell at the door, for some reason she felt uneasy about it when she thought about Silvan, perhaps because he was of her grandda's age.

"Doona worry, lass," he reassured her, guessing at her thoughts from her expression. "Silvan saw us come in last eve. He'll no' think less of you. Verily, he'll be delighted. I've no' had a lass in my chamber before."

"Really?" she asked a bit breathlessly. When he nodded, Chloe smiled radiantly: At least here in his bedroom, she was the only one. Though not what she'd prefer (like a declaration of undying love or a request that she have his babies), it was something. Then her eyes narrowed. The sun was spilling in the window behind her and Dageus's eyes were golden, dappled with darker flecks. Smoky and sensual, fringed by thick dark lashes, but gold nonetheless. "What is *with* your eyes?" she exclaimed. "Is it part of being a Druid?"

"What color are they?" he asked warily.

"Gold."

He flashed her another unguarded smile. It was like basking in the sun, she thought, tracing her fingers over his beard-shadowed jaw, smiling helplessly back.

He prodded her again. "You're good for me, lass. Now get off your back woman, lest I start something you refuse to let me finish." He sat up, bringing her with him, kissing her, nipping at her lower lip. The kiss turned heated and fierce while he was trying to stand and they fell out of bed, so she landed on the floor atop him. He promptly rolled her beneath him and kissed her till she was gasping for breath.

He gave her a cocky smile a few moments later as he helped her to her feet. "I'll wager you won't be sore long," he purred.

Definitely not, she thought, *damn the teasing, torturing man!* Muscles in the

inner parts of her thighs she'd not known she had, protested when she tried to walk And still, she wanted more.

Only much later did she realize that he hadn't answered her question.

" 'Tis nigh time," Silvan grumbled when they entered the great hall.

"Da, where's the fifth Book of Manannan?" Dageus asked without preamble.

"There is no fifth Book of Manannan," Chloe said matter-of-factly. "There are only three. Everyone knows that."

Dageus gave her a cool smirk. "Ah, the nefarious everyone. I've long wondered who comprises that group."

Silvan looked amused, cocked his head and glanced inquiringly at Dageus.

"Think you she needs a distraction? I thought you'd been distracting her quite thoroughly."

Chloe blushed.

" 'Tis in the tower library," Silvan added. "But hurry back, we've much to discuss and Nellie has shown me a most *amazing* thing."

When Dageus loped out of the hall, Silvan patted the seat beside him. "Come, m'dear," he said with a warm smile. "Bide a wee with me and tell me of yourself. How did you meet my son?"

When was she ever going to come up with a suitable answer for that? Chloe wondered wryly. She glanced away from his penetrating gaze, blushing a bit.

"The truth, m'dear," Silvan said softly.

Chloe glanced back at him, startled. "Am I that transparent?"

He smiled reassuringly. "Knowing my son as I do, I doona believe'twas an ordinary meeting."

"No," she agreed with a gusty little sigh. "We didn't exactly meet. We... er, well, it was more like we collided..."

Her story made him laugh aloud and Silvan couldn't wait to repeat it to Nellie,

who would savor every word of the outrageous tale. The lass was a fine storyteller, melodramatic enough to keep things lively and exploit the good parts for all they were worth. Funny, too, with a self-effacing sense of humor that was most appealing. The lass had no idea how bonny and unusual she was. She considered herself "a bit of a nerd." After she'd defined the word, Silvan decided a nerd was a fine thing to be. (That he himself fell into the "brainy, not particularly graceful, and a little bit backward" category might have influenced his opinion a wee.) Aye, the telling of the tale was a lovely bit of word-weaving, and the tale itself reeked of the fated meeting of a Keltar and his mate.

While she spoke, he deep-listened. He sensed a pure heart in her, a heart like Dageus's, more sensitive than most, wildly emotional, hence carefully guarded. He heard her love for his son in the slightly husky timbre of her voice. A love so strong that it fashed her a wee, and she was not yet ready to speak of it.

That it was there was enough for Silvan. His son had indeed found his mate. He pondered the irony of the timing, even as he blessed it.

One thing gave him pause, however: She still didn't know what was wrong with Dageus, and there was a newly blossomed bit of fear in her heart.

He understood that well. When a heart realized it loved was also, paradoxically, when a heart learned to fear most deeply. She wanted to know what was wrong with Dageus, yet she didn't want to hear aught that might spoil their joy, and Silvan suspected she'd have a bit of a battle with herself before she finally got around to asking.

When Dageus handed Chloe the fifth Book of Manannan, the senior MacKeltar decided he was besotted with her. She handled the tome with utter reverence, touching naught but the barest tips of the edges of the thick pages, staring with huge wondering eyes.

And sputtering. "B-b-but this isn't s-supposed to even exist and—oh, God, it was written using the early L-Latin alphabet! Do you think I could trade one of my relics for this?" she breathed, turning a gaze on Dageus that Silvan himself would have been hard-pressed to deny.

Och, aye, the lass could happily pass hours as he himself was wont to do, puzzling over the ancient texts, delighting in the stories therein. Nerd, indeed.

And Dageus, well, Dageus seemed fair frozen by the prospect of denying her aught. He rescued his son swiftly. "I'm afraid it has to stay here, m'dear. There are reasons certain tomes have ne'er been made available to the world."

"Oh, but you must at least let me read it!" she exclaimed.

Silvan assured her she could, then focused his attention on Dageus. The discovery of the chamber library had invigorated him, made him feel a score of years younger and given him a whole new sense of what it meant to be a Keltar. And in that chamber, surely there were answers to their problems. He could scarce wait to show it to his son. Enjoying the moment, he said with studied nonchalance, "I'm assuming I'm no' the only one that wasn't aware of the chamber library beneath the study?"

Dageus made a choking noise and his startled gaze flew to Silvan's. "*Beneath* the study?"

"Aye."

Dageus grabbed Chloe's hand, tugged her from the chair, fought a little battle with her as she tried to hang onto the text, plucked it from her hands and firmly deposited it on the table, then dragged her along as they hastened after Silvan.

When Silvan applied pressure to the left brace beneath the mantel on the hearth, the entire side of the hearth swung out, revealing a passageway behind it. He explained how Nellie had, one day in a fit of energetic cleaning, stumbled upon it whilst sweeping cobwebs from beneath the mantel and scrubbing black soot from the stone face of the hearth. She'd grasped the brace while scrubbing and the next thing she'd known the fireplace was moving, with her clinging to it.

"And *why* didn't she tell us?" Dageus said, incredulous.

Silvan snorted. "She thought we knew and believed she wasn't supposed to know."

Dageus shook his head. "And'tis another library?"

"Och, son, it looks to be our entire history, undisturbed for centuries."

Stunned, and she suspected a bit forgotten by the two Keltar men for the

moment, Chloe followed Dageus and Silvan into the dark void, down steep stone steps into a cavernlike chamber that was roughly fifteen feet across and twice that long. The chamber was lit by dozens of candles in wall sconces. It was lined from floor to ceiling with shelves, dotted with tables, chairs, and trunks.

Chloe's head whipped left and right, back and forth at a dizzying speed.

Focus, Zanders. You're going to make yourself sick from excitement.

No archaeologist entering a heretofore sealed and forgotten tomb could have felt any giddier. Her heart was racing, her palms sweaty, and she was not managing deep breaths very well. She strode forward, pushing past the two men, determined to see all she could before they remembered her and perhaps thought twice about letting her see it. She was in an ancient underground chamber, surrounded by her most favorite things: dusty relics from ages long past. Relics that would send the scholars in her century into paroxysms of joy, giving them topics to gnaw on and argue contentedly about for the rest of their lives.

There were stone tablets chiseled with Irish oghamic inscriptions. More stones with what looked like Pictish ogham script, a script modern scholars had never succeeded in translating, as Picts had adopted Irish ogham but hadn't been able to adapt it to their own language since Pictish and Gaelic were phonetically incompatible. Maybe they could teach her how to read it! she thought, *dizzied* by the possibility.

There were cloth-bound volumes, secured and tied in faded fabric, leather-bound volumes and scrolls, enameled plates, hand-stitched codices, bits of armor and weaponry, and—heavens—even that long-forgotten flagon was a relic!

After a few moments of breathless perusal, she glanced over her shoulder at Dageus and Silvan who'd paused just inside the chamber, their heads bent above a squat stone column upon which lay a sheet of gold.

"Da, is this what I think it is?" Dageus's voice sounded strangled.

"Aye, 'tis The Compact, as legend told, etched upon a sheet of pure gold."

"That's not very sensible," Chloe pointed out faintly. "It's too malleable. Pure gold is too soft, too easily damaged. That's why so many of the ancient tores had cores of iron beneath the gold. Well, that and to help deflect a potential sword."

What Compact, anyway?"

"Precisely their purpose," Silvan murmured, lightly tracing the edge of the gold sheet. " 'Twas said they did it to symbolize how fragile The Compact was. To underscore that it must be handled gently."

"What Compact?" Chloe asked again, stepping gingerly between a pile of leather-bound tomes and a heart-breakingly rusted shield, peering deeper into the shadowy corners of the chamber. She wondered if they'd let her live down here for a while. Another glance at Dageus made her recant that thought. Unless he lived down there with her.

"The Compact betwixt the Tuatha Dé Danaan and man."

Chloe sat down heavily on her bottom.

"Not on the tomes!" Silvan gasped.

Chloe, startled, toppled sideways and sprawled on the dusty stone floor, appalled that she'd just planted her rump on a pile of priceless texts. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I'm just a little over-excited. How old is it supposed to be? What language is it in? Can you translate it? What does it say?"

Silvan busied himself sorting through an urn of scrolls.

Dageus shrugged. "No idea what language it's in."

"You can't read it?"

"Nay," Dageus muttered.

Silvan harrumphed.

Chloe's eyes narrowed but she decided to leave it alone for the moment. She was feeling light-headed again and didn't want to push it. She needed to slowly absorb her new perspective of history, one that included both Druids with the power to manipulate time itself, and the existence of an ancient civilization that had possessed knowledge and technology advanced far beyond anything man had ever achieved.

Grandda had been right—the Tuatha Dé Danaan had once lived, and not just in

myth!

Breathe, Zanders, she told herself, dropping to her knees on the floor and reaching for the nearest tome.

Many hours later, Chloe rested her head back against the cool stone wall and closed her eyes, listening to Silvan and Dageus talk. Languages she couldn't translate, scribed in long-unused alphabets, danced on the insides of her eyelids.

There was dust in her hair, on her face and in her nose, she was wearing a dust-covered medieval gown in a castle that had no showers or indoor plumbing, and she couldn't have been happier. Well, unless she'd been sent back in time to the Alexandrian Library right after Anthony had given Cleopatra the Pergamum Library, bringing the estimated total of volumes housed therein to nearly a million, if anything historians claimed was to be trusted.

"So, according to the journal you found, our ancestors rarely used this chamber, passing the knowledge of the place only from laird to eldest son?" Dageus was saying. His deep burr sent little shivers of sexual awareness through her.

"Aye," Silvan replied. "I spent a bit of time paging through it yestreen. The most recent entry was made in eight hundred and seventy-two. 'Tis my guess the laird died unexpectedly and, like as not, quite young, and the chamber was forgotten."

"All this history," Dageus said, shaking his head. "All this lore, and we never even knew about it."

"Aye. Had we, things might have been very different. Mayhap some of us would have made different choices."

Chloe opened her eyes a slit. There'd been a strange, pointed note in Silvan's voice when he'd made the last comment. She studied Dageus's chiseled profile, bronzed by the flickering candlelight, wondering what he wasn't telling her. She'd not forgotten about the curse or his unceasing searching of the old tomes. Though she'd had ample opportunity to ask him yesterday, she'd not wanted anything to mar the wonder of their day together.

Truth was, she didn't want anything to mar the wonder of this day, either. She would zealously defend it from the merest hint of gloom. She'd never felt so bubbly, so elated, and she didn't want it to end. She—who always pushed

inquisitively, who never took "I don't know" for an answer—abruptly had no desire to make even the smallest inquiry.

Tomorrow, she promised herself. I'll ask him tomorrow.

For now, between suddenly finding herself in the past, experiencing passion with such an intense man, and discovering so many treasures, she had enough to contend with. She was having a hard time just keeping pace. Merely pondering the fact that she was in the sixteenth century was overwhelming enough.

As if he felt her gaze on him, Dageus turned his head suddenly and looked straight into her eyes.

His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed, his gaze hot and possessive. "Da, Chloe needs a bath," he said, without taking his gaze from hers. He caught his lower lip with his teeth and all the muscles in her lower body clenched. "Now."

"I'm a bit dusty myself," Silvan agreed after a brief, awkward pause. "I suspect we could all use a bit of a break and a bite to eat."

Dageus rose, seeming larger than usual in the confines of the low-ceilinged chamber. He held out his hand. "Come, lass." Chloe went.

"Must we chain him like that?" Gwen asked, frowning.

"Aye, love," Drustan replied. "He'll kill himself before he'll talk, if I'm fool enough to give him the opportunity."

They stepped back, staring through the bars of the dungeon where a lean man with dose-cropped brown hair was chained to the wall, his arms and legs outspread. He snarled at them through the bars, but the sound was muffled by his gag.

"And you have to gag him?"

"He was muttering something that sounded suspiciously like a chant before I did. Unless I'm questioning him, he stays gagged. Doona venture down here without me, lass."

"It just seems so... barbaric, Drustan. What if he's not even involved in this?"

Drustan collected the assortment of personal possessions he'd removed from the man's pockets before restraining him. He'd divested him of two lethally sharp daggers, a cell phone, a length of cord, a large amount of cash, and a few pieces of hard candy. The man carried no wallet, no identification, no papers of any sort. He tucked the phone, cord, and candy in his pocket, palmed the blades and wrapped an arm around Gwen's shoulders, guiding her away from the cell toward the stairs.

"He is. I caught him lurking outside the study doors. When he saw me, he looked as if he recognized me. Then he looked *puzzled* and finally shocked. I'm fair certain he thought I was Dageus and didn't know Dageus had a twin. Further, Dageus told me that Chloe told him her assailant had a tattoo on his neck. Though Dageus had no idea what kind of tattoo, 'tis entirely too coincidental that our intruder also has a tattoo on his neck. Aye, he's involved. And though he's not talking, he will," he vowed with grim determination.

"None of this makes any sense to me. Why would anyone want to hurt Dageus or Chloe? What could they possibly want?"

"I doona ken," Drustan growled. "But you may rest assured we'll be finding out."

Chapter 21

It was stuffy in the chamber library and Dageus shifted restlessly in his chair, then dropped to the floor and leaned his back against the cool stone wall. He glanced at Chloe and smiled wryly. Her mere presence made it damned hard for him to concentrate on the work at hand.

She was sitting cross-legged on a pile of cushions in a corner of the underground chamber, poring, as she had been for some time now, over the fourth Book of Manannan. A few days ago, he'd swapped her for the fifth volume, so he might search that tome himself, since she was slower translating than he. Much to her extreme and oft-voiced consternation, she was unable to read most of the lore in the chamber. Scribed in forgotten dialects, using archaic alphabets compounded by grossly inconsistent spelling, the majority of them were impossible for her to decipher.

His hot gaze raked her from head to toe and he swallowed a little growl of ever-present desire. Dressed in a thin, clinging lilac gown—one of several Nell had altered for her, and he suspected Nellie was deliberately choosing ones to drive him to distraction—with a deeply scooped neckline and snug bodice, she was a vision. Her tousled curls spilled about her face and she was pinching her luscious lower lip, deep in thought. She got as lost as his da did in the old tales, becoming absorbed to the point of deafness.

When she shifted position, curling on her side on the soft cushions, her breasts pushed together above the neckline of her gown and lust quickened within him. Though he'd loved her upon awakening, as he did each morn, he ached anew to bury his face in that lush valley, kiss and lick and nibble till she was panting and crying his name.

The past ten days had passed swiftly, far too swiftly for Dageus's taste. He wanted to halt time, to elongate each day, stretch it to the length of a year. To cram a lifetime into the now, suck it dry of the bittersweet joy of being mated.

Sweet because he had his woman.

Bitter because he had to stay his tongue, and not make promises he burned to speak. Promises that weren't his to give because his future was uncertain. To his

immense frustration, he couldn't offer what small truths he possessed either, because Chloe still hadn't asked him about the "curse."

He wanted to tell her. He *needed* to tell her. Needed to know that she knew what he was and could accept it. Thrice he'd tested the waters, once in her dream, once later, while strolling the gardens with her beneath a silvery half-full moon. In her dream, she'd flinched and evaded. In her waking, she'd done the same.

The third time he'd begun speaking of it, she'd tugged his head down and used one of his tactics: She'd silenced him with a kiss and made him forget not only what he was about to say but what century he was in.

It wasn't like him to fail to confront a difficult situation, but he'd reluctantly ceded to her resistance and let it go for the time being.

He had no doubt that, eventually, she would ask Chloe was nothing if not tenaciously curious. He knew he'd burdened her with a great many new things in a very short time: time-travel, Druids, legendary races, new relics, the demands of his insatiable lusty appetites. She'd proven remarkably resilient. If she needed a bit of time to work her way around to beginning to ask questions again, he certainly couldn't begrudge her the respite.

So for the past ten days, he'd focused instead on the sweet half of bittersweet, drawing succor from her sunny optimism and endless enthusiasm. Each day that passed, he grew ever more fascinated by her. He'd known she was intelligent, strong, and had a true heart, but it was the small things about her that truly enchanted him. The way her eyes went wide and excited whenever Silvan read a choice bit from one of the texts. The way she'd stood hovering above The Compact for half an hour, hands curling, but refusing to touch because she wouldn't risk marring the soft gold with so much as a fingerprint. The way she chased his young half brothers around the hall in the evenings after supper, pretending she was "a wee fierce beastie," until they were shrieking with excitement and mock-fear. The way she teased his cantankerous da, flirting with him in a winsome way, until she succeeded in bringing a blush to his wrinkled cheeks and a smile to his lips, chasing some of the worry from his somber brown eyes.

He was proud of the woman she was, and savagely possessive of her. He was fiercely glad that he'd been the one to awaken her to intimacy, that he was the

one to whom she'd entrusted a small part of her heart.

Aye, he knew he'd touched her heart. She was not a lass who could hide her feelings, she simply didn't possess such guards. Though she'd not said the words, he could see it in her eyes, and feel it in her caress. No woman had ever touched him quite the way she did. At times, it seemed she was touching him with near reverence, as if she was as awed as he was that they meshed so perfectly, two interlocking pieces of wood carved from the same tree.

She had no idea what it did to him to see her dressed in the colors of his clan, strolling through his childhood home. It made him feel all elemental warrior and lover, a man of fierce needs and primitive laws. The only thing that could make it sweeter would be if he, too, could don the Keltar colors again.

But that was a bearable loss. At a time when he'd expected little from life, she'd given him everything, including a reawakening of the wonder and hope he'd so long ago lost. The heathery fields seemed again fertile with burgeoning life. Everywhere he looked, he saw something of beauty: a wee pine marten questing the breeze, a golden eagle soaring overhead, tawny-crowned and majestic, mayhap simply a stately oak he'd walked past a hundred times but not truly seen. The night sky ablaze with stars seemed again full of secrets and miracles.

Chloe was a shaft of sunlight that had lanced through the storm clouds he'd lived beneath for so long, illuming his world.

She'd flung herself wholly and without reservation into their intimacy. She loved to touch, indeed, she seemed to crave it. She was constantly slipping her wee hand into his, or burying them in his hair, grazing his scalp with her nails. Like a wild tomcat who'd had absolute freedom, but known no place to call home, he savored the gende constancy of the familiar touch of familiar hands.

He'd been right in thinking that with her, lovemaking might yield some indefinable result he'd not before experienced. Sex had always calmed and soothed him, easing his muscles, relaxing his mental tension, but now, when he fell sated, holding Chloe close, his heart was also at ease.

But if his present was a vast and sunny blue sky, his future was filled with the ominous roll of crashing thunder-heads.

And he dare not forget that.

He dragged his gaze away from Chloe and inhaled deeply, forcing his thoughts back to less savory matters.

In the past ten days, though he and Silvan had discovered a wealth of long-forgotten information about their clan in the chamber library, and learned more about their purpose as Druids than they'd ever known, they'd still found no mention of the thirteen and scant information concerning their benefactors. Silvan was hoping they might find some way to contact the Tuatha Dé in the old records, but Dageus didn't share his da's optimism on that score. He wasn't convinced the ancient race was even still about. And if they were, why would they bother to appear to a Keltar who'd fallen from grace when they'd not bothered to appear to any other Keltar? He wouldn't be surprised to learn they'd planted their traps in the in-between and gone away thousands of years ago, never to return.

The search was taking too long. In the twenty-first century there'd been a dearth of information, now there was too much, and sifting through it was an epic undertaking.

That wouldn't have fashed him, except he'd recently noticed something that had made him realize time was critical: His eyes were no longer returning to gold, not even with their constant lovemaking. Nay, his eyes were now burnished copper, and darkening further each day.

Though he was using no magic, though he was tooping incessantly, though the ancient ones had not spoken again, the darkness inside him was changing him anyway, in the same manner that wine inevitably soaked into and permeated the cask that held it.

He could feel the thirteen growing stronger, and himself growing more comfortable with them. They'd been a part of him for so long that they were beginning to feel like another appendage—and why wouldn't he use an extra hand? Now, instead of catching himself only a few times a day about to use magic for something simple like filling the bath, he was catching himself a score of times or more.

At least he was still catching himself. He knew that anon he wouldn't. And in

even yet more time, he wouldn't care. That fine line he mustn't cross was getting increasingly difficult for him to see clearly.

Rubbing his unshaven jaw, he wondered if it might be possible to strike some kind of deal with the thirteen.

Strike a deal with the devil? his honor hissed. *Like what? They get to use your body part of the time? The devil cheats, you fool!*

Aye, there was that worry. The beings in him were not honorable, could not be trusted. The mere fact that he was considering trying to barter with them proved how critical time had become.

And proved how desperate he was to find a way to secure some kind of future with Chloe.

Sighing, he turned his attention back to the text. Now more than ever, 'twas imperative he exercise utmost discipline. Though he'd far prefer to sweep Chloe into his arms, carry her from the chamber and show her more of his world, live only in the moment, he knew he had to revert to the schedule he'd kept in Manhattan.

Work from dawn till dusk, love Chloe only in the night, then work again whilst she slumbered.

He had his eye on much more than a few moons with his mate. He was determined that he would have his full measure of life with her.

When she got up and slipped from the chamber, he kept his gaze firmly fixed on the tome in his lap.

Chloe strolled blissfully through the gardens, marveling that already a week and a half had sped by. They'd been the finest days of her life.

Her time had been divided primarily between exploring the contents of the chamber library and exploring the newfound pleasure of passion. The explosive heat between her and Dageus was evidently palpable enough that on several occasions Silvan had ordered them to leave the chamber library, telling them dryly "to go... walk a wee or... some such activity. The two of you are like a pair of tea kettles, steaming up my tomes."

The first time he'd said such a thing, Chloe had blushed furiously, but then Dageus had given her what she'd come to think of as The Look and she'd swiftly forgotten her embarrassment. He had a way of canting his head low and looking up at her, his dark gaze heated and intense, that never failed to make her weak-kneed with desire, thinking about all the things he was going to do to her.

Because she was unable to read a lot of the stuff in the chamber and was insatiably curious about the sixteenth century, while the men had worked, she'd stolen away frequently. She'd thoroughly explored the castle, leaving no part untouched: the buttery, the larders, the kitchens, the chapel, the armory, the garderobes (though scrupulously cleaned daily, those she could have done without), even Silvan's tower library—where she was grateful to discover she could translate some of the more recent works. The elderly man had copies of every philosophical, ethical, mathematical, and cosmological treatise of historical significance on his meticulously organized shelves.

Also during those hours away from Dageus, she'd gotten to know Nell and had met his young half brothers, Ian and Robert, precious dark-haired two-and-a-half-year-old boys with sunny dispositions. She could hardly look at them without thinking what beautiful babies Dageus would make.

And that she'd like to be the one he made them with.

A delicious little shiver raced over her skin at the thought of making a family with him, building a future.

For the past ten days she'd watched him carefully and had concluded that he definitely cared about her. He treated her the same way Drustan had treated Gwen that day at Maggie's castle, anticipating her desires: slipping from the chamber library to fetch her a cup of tea or a snack, or a damp cloth to wipe dust from her cheek. Disappearing into the gardens and returning with an armful of fresh flowers, leading her to bed and covering her naked body with them. Lazily, tenderly bathing her in the evenings before a peat fire, helping her plait her hair like Nell's. She felt treasured, cosseted, and though he didn't say it, loved.

She'd realized, while watching him and reflecting upon all she knew of him, that Dageus MacKeltar would probably never speak of love, unless someone spoke to him about it first. Gwen had essentially told her that much back in the stones.

Dageus doesn't look for love from a woman because he's never been given any reason to.

Well, Chloe Zanders was going to give him the reason to. Tonight. Over a romantic dinner in their bedchamber, which she'd already filled with urns of fresh-cut heather and dozens of oil globes that she'd pilfered from other rooms in the castle.

She'd set the scene, embellishing it with romantic touches, Nell had arranged the menu, and all she had to do was speak her heart.

And if he doesn't say it back? a niggling little doubt tried to surface.

She thrust it firmly away. She would entertain no doubts, no fears. A few days ago, over mugs of cocoa in the kitchens, she and Nell had had a long talk Nell had openly shared her own experience with Silvan, and had told her about the twelve years they'd wasted. Chloe couldn't imagine loving in silence for so long.

Twelve years! Sheesh, she wasn't going to be able to wait twelve more *hours*.

When Chloe had been a teenager, not knowing anything about kissing, she'd practiced on a pillow, feeling inordinately silly, but how else was a girl supposed to get a feel for it? She'd read books, and avidly watched movies to see how lips met and where noses went, but it wasn't the same as actually trying to press her lips to something. (Personally, she harbored the firm conviction that there wasn't a person alive anywhere in the world that hadn't practiced kissing on something. A mirror, a pillow, the back of their hand.)

Since her first kiss had been reasonably successful, she decided that practicing saying "I love you," wasn't a completely idiotic idea.

As there weren't exactly a plethora of mirrors around the castle, when she left the gardens, strolled into the great hall and spied the shiny shield hanging on the wall near the hearth, she yielded to impulse, dragged a chair over to it and hopped up, peering at her reflection.

She wanted the moment tonight to be just right. She didn't want to stutter or stammer around.

"I love you," she told the shield softly.

It hadn't come out quite right. It was a good thing she'd decided to practice.

She wet her lips and tried it again. "I love you," she said tenderly.

"I love you," she said firmly.

"I love you," she tried a sexy voice. Reflecting a moment, she decided it was probably better that she just speak normally. She didn't do throaty well.

Saying it felt *good*, she thought, staring at her reflection. She'd been holding it so tightly inside her that she had begun to feel like a pressure-cooker about to blow her lid off. She'd never been able to keep her feelings to herself. It wasn't part of her make-up, any more than casual sex was.

She smiled radiantly at the shield, pretending it was Dageus. The three simple words just didn't seem like enough. Love was so much larger than words.

"I love you, I love you, I love you. I love you more than chocolate. I love you more than the whole world is big." She paused, thinking, searching for a way to explain what she felt. "I love you more than artifacts. I love you so much it makes my toes curl just *thinking* about it."

Pushing her hair back from her face, she donned her most sincere expression. "I *love* you."

"You can have the confounded shield if you love it that much, lass," Dageus said, sounding utterly bewildered. Chloe felt all the blood drain from her face.

She swallowed hard. Several times. *Oh, God*, she thought dismally, *was it humanly possible to feel any more stupid?*

She shifted awkwardly on the chair, cleared her throat and stared down at the floor, thinking frantically, trying to come up with some excuse for what she'd just been doing. Back rigidly to him, she began to babble. "It's... er, not the shield, urn, you know. I wasn't really talking to the shield, I just couldn't find a mirror and this is just a little positive reinforcement thingie I do sometimes. I read it in a book somewhere that it boosted self-confidence and... er, engendered a general sense of well-being, and it really does work, you should try it sometime," she said brightly.

She realized she was talking with her hands, gesturing a bit wildly, so she clasped them firmly behind her back.

He remained silent behind her, stressing her out completely, and she began babbling again. "What I'm saying is that I really don't want the shield. I mean, I think you've given me more than enough artifacts already, and I couldn't ask for anything else, so if you'll just go away now I'll resume my exercises. It's important that one does them alone."

More silence.

What on *earth* was he thinking? Was he going to burst into laughter? Was he smiling? She peered in the shield, but since she was up on the chair, he was several feet lower than she was and she couldn't see him.

"Dageus?" she said warily, refusing to turn. If she looked at him now, she might start crying. She'd *so* wanted the moment tonight to be tender and romantic, and damn it all, now if she said it to him tonight, he'd *know* she'd been practicing and he'd think she was a total dweeb!

"Aye, lass?" he said finally, slowly.

"Why aren't you going away?" she asked tightly.

A long pause, then a cautious, "If you doona mind, lass, I'd like to watch."

She closed her eyes. Was he making fun of her? "Absolutely not."

"With all the things we've done together, there's something you wouldn't let me watch? I think'tis a bit late to be getting self-conscious around me," he said. She couldn't decide if she was picking up a hint of lazy amusement in his voice or not.

"Go. A. Way," she gritted.

He didn't. She could *feel* him standing there, his regard an intense pressure on the back of her skull.

"Chloe-lass," he said then, softly. Tenderly. "Turn around, sweet."

He *knew*, she thought, absolutely mortified. Nobody would fall for that pathetic

excuse she'd made up.

But this wasn't the moment she'd picked. She'd had it all planned out and he was ruining it for her!

"Chloe," he repeated softly.

"*Oh!*" Something in her suddenly, simply snapped, and she spun about to face him. Plunking her fists at her waist, she shouted, "I love you! Okay? But I didn't want to say it that way, I wanted to say it just *right* and you *ruined* it."

Scowling, she leaped from the chair and stormed from the hall.

Chapter 22

Dageus stood motionless in the great hall.

That had been singularly the most unforgettable moment of his life.

When he was his da's age—in the event he had the luxury of living that long—he had no doubt he'd still be replaying the vision of Chloe perched on that chair before the shield, practicing how to say she loved him, just right.

At first when he'd come abovestairs to fetch fresh candles for the chamber library, and he'd walked into the great hall, what she'd been doing hadn't made sense to him. He'd genuinely thought she was gushing over the artifact.

He teased her, and only then had he noticed the tension and misery emanating from her. She'd begun to babble, which was always a dead giveaway that she was upset. When she'd given him her absurd spiel about positive reinforcement or some such nonsense, he'd realized what she'd really been doing.

Practicing how to tell him she loved him.

How utterly adorable she was.

She loved him. She'd said it. Of course she'd shouted it at him, but a man could deal with that when the woman loved him more than the whole world was big.

He laughed exultantly, turned sharply on his heel, and hurried off to catch her. And to tell her that, since he was bigger, he was fair certain he loved her more.

But it didn't work out quite that way, for he didn't catch her until she was almost to the bedchamber.

And when he caught her, grasping at the billowing skirt of her gown, he tugged harder than he'd meant to and the thin silky fabric ripped. Clear up the back. And she had nothing on beneath it. Only those luscious shapely legs and the round curves of her beautiful behind. The fabric ripped clean to her nape and his thoughts turned instantly primitive and wild.

She glanced back at him, looking shocked, and though he suspected he should

assure her he hadn't meant to do that, he couldn't seem to manage a word. Her declaration of love coupled with all that naked rosy skin had rendered him witless.

Growling low in his throat, he scooped her into his arms and planted his mouth firmly over hers.

She was stiff at first, but in a few moments she was kissing him back passionately.

"You didn't have to rip my dress," she said plaintively when he let her breathe. "I love this one. Nellie worked on it for days."

"I'm sorry, lass," he said somberly. " 'Twas an accident, lass. Sometimes I forget my strength. I mean to be gentle but it doesn't come out that way. Can you forgive me?"

She sighed, but nodded and kissed him again, locking her arms behind his neck as he carried her toward the door of their bedchamber.

"You have, without a doubt, Chloe, the most lovely behind I've ever seen," he purred, shifting her in his arms to splay his big palm over the twin curves of it.

"Oh!" She squirmed in his arms. "I tell you I love you and *that's* what you say?"

He silenced her with another kiss, and kicked open the bedchamber door.

"And I'd love you even if you didn't," he said softly.

She melted in his arms.

"And I think that no man has ever been told he was loved in such a memorable fashion, and I shall always treasure the memory."

She smiled beatifically. "Really? You don't think I'm the biggest geek in the world?"

He tossed her to the bed and slipped a dirk from his boot. "I think," he said silkily, as he gripped the bodice of her ruined gown in his hand and slit it down the front, laying the gown neatly in two halves, "that you are perfect exactly as you are and I wouldn't change one thing about you."

He tossed the torn dress from the bed and tugged his shirt over his head.

She watched him with wide eyes, then laughed. "Nell is *really* going to wonder what happened to my dress."

"I'm fair certain Nellie will never ask," he said huskily, as he stretched his body atop hers. "I've seen a gown or two of hers in the rag heap."

"Really?" Chloe blinked, pondering Silvan in a new light. He was a handsome man, and it *was* from his genes that Dageus and Drustan had come. Behind his scholarly mien, she suddenly realized, Silvan MacKeltar probably concealed a lot of things.

"Aye. Truly."

"You have too many clothes on," Chloe complained breathlessly a few moments later.

He offered her his dirk to cut them off, but she took one look at those snug leather trews and decided there was no way she was letting a sharp blade get near what she knew was inside them.

So she borrowed another of his delicious tactics and undressed him mostly with her mouth.

Chloe was deliriously content. Curled with her backside to Dageus's front, his strong arms wrapped around her, she was blissfully sated.

He loved her. He'd not only told her, he'd shown her with his body. It was there in the way he stroked her cheek or brushed her curls from her eyes. It was there in his long, slow kisses. It was there in the way he held her in the aftermath.

With that resolved, she was impatient to lay all her concerns to rest. With such love between them, she knew they could face anything together.

She squirmed in his embrace, slipping around in his arms to face him. He smiled at her, one of those lazy, melting smiles he gave so rarely, and kissed her.

Sighing with pleasure, and before he could distract her again, she drew her head back, breaking the kiss. "Dageus, I'm ready to know about the curse now. Tell me what it is, and tell me what you're looking for."

He kissed her again, lazily, sucking her lower lip.

"Please," she persisted. "I need to know."

He smiled faintly, then sighed. "I ken it. I've wanted to tell you, but it seemed you needed a bit more time."

"I did. So many things happened so quickly, that I felt like I needed to catch my breath or something. But I'm ready now," she assured him.

He stared at her a long moment, his eyes narrowed. "Lass," he said softly, "if you tried to leave me, I fear I wouldn't let you. I fear I would do whatever I had to do, no matter how ruthless, to keep you."

"I consider myself warned," she said pertly. "Trust me, I'm not going anywhere. Now tell me."

He held her gaze a bit longer, silently assessing her. Then, capturing her hands in his, he twined their fingers together and began.

"So let me get this straight," a wide-eyed Chloe clarified some time later, "you used the stones to go back in time and—oh! *That's* what that quote in the Midhe Codex meant about the man who takes the bridge that cheats death! The bridge is the *Ban Drochaid*, 'the white bridge,' because you can take it backward in time and undo a person's death. That quote *was* about you."

"Aye, lass."

"So you saved Drustan's life, but because you broke a sacred oath that you'd sworn to the Tuatha Dé, you ended up setting an ancient evil free?"

He nodded warily.

"Well, where is this ancient evil?" she asked, bewildered. "Are you chasing it through the centuries or something?"

He made a sound of dry, dark amusement. "Something like that," he muttered.

"Well?" she prodded.

"Rather, 'tis chasing me," he said, nearly inaudibly.

"I don't understand," Chloe pressed, blinking.

"Why doona you just leave it for now, Chloe? You know enough to help us search. If, while reading, you find aught about the Tuatha Dé or the Draghar, bring it to my or Silvan's attention."

"Where is this ancient evil, Dageus?" she repeated evenly.

When he tried to turn his face away, she cupped it in her hands and refused to let him look away.

"Tell me. You *promised* to tell me it all. Now tell me where the damned thing is and, more important, how do we destroy it?"

Dark gaze boring into hers, he wet his lips and said softly, "'Tis inside me."

Chapter 23

Chloe delicately turned a thick vellum page of the tome on her lap, though she was not really reading it, too lost in thought.

'Tis inside me, he'd said, and so many things finally made sense to her. Bits and pieces slid neatly into place, giving her her first real glimpse of the whole man.

He'd told her everything that night, several days ago, as they lay in bed, faces close, fingers laced. About Drustan and Gwen (no wonder Gwen had been trying to brace her!), and about how Drustan had been enchanted and put in the tower. He told her how he'd immersed himself working on Drustan's future home (and now she knew why he'd sounded so proud of the castle), and about the fire in which Drustan had died. He told her about the night he'd warred with himself, then gone into the stones and broken his oath. He told her that he'd not truly believed in the old legends till the ancient evil had descended upon him in the in-between, and it had been too late.

He told her what the use of magic did to him, and how making love helped him. How he'd gone through the stones to the future, to make certain Drustan had indeed been reunited with Gwen, needing to know that his sacrifice hadn't been for naught. And how he'd stayed, unwilling to face his clan as he was, hoping to find a way to save himself.

He told her he'd not worn the plaid of the Keltar since, though he'd not mentioned the scrap she'd found beneath his pillow, so she'd not brought it up either. She knew what it meant. She could picture him lying alone in his bed in his museum of a penthouse, in a world that must have seemed so strange to him, staring at it. It had symbolized all his hopes, that worn piece of doth.

She'd thought him an idle womanizer when she'd met him, this man who was so much more than that!

Now she understood the sensation she'd had on several occasions of an ancient, evil presence: It had always been when Dageus had recently used magic. She understood how he'd breached such impenetrable security systems: with a bit of supernatural help. She understood the quixotic nature of his eyes: They darkened as he darkened. She had an entirely new appreciation for his discipline and

control. She suspected that she'd only glimpsed the tip of the iceberg, and couldn't begin to fathom the battle he was waging every waking moment.

Although he condemned himself for carrying such evil within him, for having freed it to begin with, Chloe couldn't quite see it that way.

Dageus had done what he'd done out of love for his brother. Should he have cheated death in such a fashion? Maybe not. It did seem to go against the natural order of things; still, if the power to do so existed, well... was that not then part of the natural order of things? It was an ethically explosive issue, not because of the act itself but because of the potential for a man to abuse such power, to cheat at every turn.

Yet Dageus hadn't cheated again. Since he'd broken his oath he'd become the repository for absolute power, and not once abused it. Instead, he'd devoted every moment of his existence to trying to find a way to lay that power to rest.

What was his actual transgression? Loving so much that he'd risked it all. And heaven help her—she loved him all the more for it.

Surely his intent mitigated his action to some extent? Even in man's court of law, punishment for a crime was meted out in degrees respective of intent.

"It wasn't as if any of you asked for such power," she said irritably.

Silvan and Dageus both glanced up from their texts. Since Dageus had confessed everything two nights ago, they'd spent nearly every waking minute in the dusty chamber, determined to find answers.

"Well you didn't," she seethed. She'd been quietly fuming about for days, and like every other emotion she felt, she could only hold it in so long.

"Verily, m'dear, I doona think man *should* possess the power of the stones," Silvan said softly. "I canna tell you how many times I've wanted to topple them, to destroy the tablets and the formulas."

"Do it," Dageus said intensely. "After we've gone again, do it, Da."

"It would be outright defiance of them, you ken," Silvan pointed out. "And what if the world—"

"The world should have the right to either prosper or destroy itself, by itself," Dageus said quietly.

"I agree with Dageus," Chloe said, reaching for her cup of cooling tea. "I don't think man should have power he's not capable of understanding and discovering himself. I can't help but think that by the time we're evolved enough to fathom how to manipulate time, we'd be wise enough not to do it. Besides, who can really say that any of the times the stones were used, the outcome was better?"

Dageus had explained to her the only conditions under which they were permitted to use the stones: were their line in danger of extinction, or were the world in great peril. He'd told her of the few occasions they'd opened a gate through time: once to relocate sacred, powerful objects belonging to the Templars, in order to whisk them from the grasp of the power-hungry king who'd destroyed their Order. Yet, who could say that, had man been left to his own devices, he wouldn't have found another way that would have served as well?

Dageus met her gaze and they shared a long intimate look. There was such heat in his eyes that she felt it like a sultry caress against her skin. *I doona ken how this may end, Chloe*, he'd said to her that night.

When it *ends*, she'd replied firmly, *it will end with me at your side and we will have freed you.*

I love you, he mouthed to her across the chamber.

Chloe smiled radiantly. She knew that. Knew it more completely than she'd ever thought a woman could know. Since discovering what his "curse" truly was, she'd not wavered in her feelings for him, not for even a moment. What was inside him was *not* him, and she refused to believe it ever would be. A man who could withstand such a thing for so long was a man who was good to the very core. *I love you too*, she shaped the words soundlessly.

They fell silent again, returning to their work with quiet urgency. Though Dageus had not admitted his condition was worsening, both she and Silvan had noticed that his eyes no longer returned to their natural color. They'd discussed it earlier, when Dageus had slipped out to fetch Chloe some tea, and knew what it meant.

They took a brief break when Nell brought the midday meal down into the chamber. Shortly after Nell had cleared the dishes away, Dageus straightened abruptly in his chair. "Och,'tis about blethering time!"

Chloe's heart began to pound. "What? What did you find?"

"Aye, speak, lad, what is it?" Silvan pressed.

Dageus scanned the page for a moment, translating silently. " 'Tis about the Tuatha Dé. It tells what happened when the thirteen were..." He trailed *off*, reading to himself.

"Read aloud," Silvan growled.

Dageus raised his gaze from the fifth Book of Manannan. "Aye, but give me a moment."

Chloe and Silvan waited breathlessly.

Dageus scanned the page and flipped to the next. 'M right," he said finally. "The scribe tells that in the early days of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danaan came to the isle'descending in a mist so thick it dimmed the rising of three suns.' They were possessed of many and great powers. They were not of man's tribe, though they had a similar form. Tall, slender, entrancing to gaze upon—the scribe describes them as'shining with empyreal radiance'—they were graceful, artistic people who claimed to be seeking no more than a place to live in peace. Mankind proclaimed them gods and tried to worship them as such, but the rulers of the Tuatha Dé forbade such practice. They settled among man, sharing their knowledge and artistry, and so ensued a golden age unlike any before. Learning attained new heights, language became a thing of power and beauty, song and poetry developed the power to heal."

"That much is similar to the myths," Chloe remarked when he paused.

"Aye," Dageus agreed. "As both races seemed to prosper by the union, in time, the Tuatha Dé selected and trained mortals as Druids: as lawgivers, lorekeepers, bards, seers, and advisors to mortal kings. They gifted those Druids with knowledge of the stars and of the universe, of the sacred mathematics and laws that governed nature, even inducting them into certain mysteries of time itself.

"But as time passed, and the Druids watched their otherworldly companions never sickening or aging, envy took root within their mortal hearts. It festered and grew, until one day thirteen of the most powerful Druids presented a list of demands to the Tuatha Dé, including among them, the secret of their longevity.

"They were told man was not yet ready to possess such things."

Rubbing his jaw, Dageus fell silent, translating ahead. Just when Chloe felt like screaming, he began again.

"The Tuatha Dé decided they could no longer remain among mankind. That very eve, they vanished. 'Tis said that for three days after they left, the sun was eclipsed by dark clouds, the oceans lay still upon the shores, and all the fruit in the land withered on the limb.

"In their fury, the thirteen Druids turned to the teachings of an ancient, forbidden god, 'one whose name is best forgotten, hence not scribed herein.' The god to whom the Druids supplicated themselves was a primitive god, spawned in the earliest mists of Gaea. Calling upon those darkest of powers, armed with the knowledge the Tuatha Dé had given them, the Druids attempted to follow the immortal ones, to seize their lore, and steal the secret of eternal life."

"So they really were... er, are immortal?" Chloe breathed.

" 'Twould seem so, lass," Dageus said. He skimmed the text again. "Give me a moment, there are no comparable words for some of this." Another long pause. "I think this is the gist of it: What the thirteen did not know is that the realms—I can't think of a better word—within realms are impenetrable by force. Such travel therein is a delicate process of... er, sifting or straining time and place. In their attempt to brutalize or coerce a path between the realms, the thirteen Druids nearly tore them all asunder. The Tuatha Dé, sensing the distress in the... weaving of the world, returned to avert catastrophe.

"The Tuatha Dé's fury was immense. They scattered their once-friends, now bitter enemies, to the far corners of the earth. They punished the evil ones, the Druids who'd chosen greed over honor, who'd loved power more than they'd valued the sanctity of life—not by killing them—but by locking them into a place between realms, giving them the immortality for which they'd lusted. Eternity in nothingness, without form, without cease."

"By Amergin, would that not be hell?" Silvan breathed.

Chloe nodded with wide eyes.

Dageus made a choking noise. "Och, so *that's* who the Draghar are!"

"Who?" Chloe and Silvan said as one.

He frowned. "The scribe tells that even before the disagreement with the Tuatha Dé, the thirteen Druids had formed a separate, secret sect within the larger numbers of their brethren, with their own talisman and name.

Their symbol was a winged serpent, and they called themselves the Draghar."

It was Chloe's turn to make a strangled sound. "A w-winged serpent?"

Dageus glanced at her. "Aye. Does that mean something to you, lass?" he asked swiftly.

"Dageus, that man who attacked me in your penthouse—didn't you see his tattoo?"

He shook his head. "I saw it, but I didn't get a good look at it. I doona ken what it was."

"It was a winged serpent! I saw it up dose when he was on top of me in the kitchen."

"Bletherin' hell," Dageus exploded. "It begins to make sense." He leapt to his feet so abruptly that the Book of Manannan tumbled to the floor. "But..." he trailed off. "How could that be?" he muttered, looking baffled.

Chloe was about to ask what made sense and how what could be, when Silvan rose and retrieved the fallen tome. While Dageus paced, muttering beneath his breath, Silvan continued reading where Dageus had left off.

" 'Tis said that some time after the Druids were scattered, and the thirteen locked away in their prison, a small band of those who survived regrouped in an effort to reclaim their lost lore. Och, listen to this: An Order arose, founded upon the divination of a seer who claimed the Draghar would one day, far in the future, return and reclaim the powers the Tuatha Dé had stolen from them. Apparently

this seer wrote a detailed prophecy, describing the circumstances under which the ancient ones would return, and the Druid sect of the Draghar was formed to watch and await such events that would signify the prophecy's fruition—" He broke off abruptly, read a few moments in silence, then flipped the page. Then he scanned through the final few remaining sheaves. "That's it. 'Tis all that was written about it." He cursed, skimming and reskimming the subsequent pages. Then he snapped the tome shut and placed it aside.

Chloe's mind was whirling as she watched Dageus pace. She and Silvan exchanged uneasy glances.

Finally Dageus stopped pacing and looked at his father. "Well, that seals it. Chloe and I must return to her century."

"Doona be hasty, lad," Silvan protested. "We need to reflect on this—"

"Nay, Da," he said, his features taut, his gaze dark. " 'Tis evident that the man who attacked Chloe was a member of this Draghar sect. Their prophecy must have guided them to me. From what we just read, 'tis apparent they doona have the power of the stones, so they can't come through time after me. I doona know how to find the sect in this century, but in hers, they know where I am."

"You *want* them to find you?" Silvan exclaimed. "Why?"

"Who else might possess the most detailed information on these beings that inhabit me, than the Druid Order that has preserved their Prophecy all these millennia?" He cast a sweeping glance around the contents of the chamber. "We could waste many moons searching here, to no avail, and I... well, let's just say I've a feeling my time is swift being exhausted."

Chloe drew a deep, fortifying breath. "I think he's right, Silvan," she said. "The Keltar have all this lore about the Keltar, it's logical to assume that the Draghar have an equally large collection of works about the Draghar. Besides, you can continue searching here, and pass it forward to us, if you find something. If I understand this time-travel stuff correctly, anything you find would be waiting for us when we get back."

"I doona like this," Silvan said stiffly.

"Da, even if we'd not uncovered this information today, I wouldn't have been

able to remain much longer and you know it. In case you've no' noticed, my eyes —"

"We've noticed," Chloe and Silvan said together.

"Then," Dageus said firmly, "you know I've the right of it. If naught else, I must get Chloe back to her time before'tis too risky for me to use the magic to open the white bridge again. We must go back and best we do so without delay."

They spent their final night in the sixteenth century over a leisurely dinner in the great hall, then passed the remainder of the gloaming on the terrace. Chloe sat on the cobbled stones with Silvan and Nell and watched Dageus playing with his young half brothers, chasing them about the lawn beneath the crimson-streaked sunset.

It was hard to believe they were going back again, Chloe thought, savoring the soft hooting of owls and hum of crickets. She'd missed such peaceful sounds since she'd left Kansas and had thoroughly been enjoying falling asleep each night to such sweet music in the strong arms of her Highlander. It occurred to her that though she'd been in the past for weeks, she'd scarcely gotten to see much of it, other than the castle and one dusty chamber. She'd so wanted to return to the village of Balanoch and explore more, and if she'd had enough time would have begged to go to Edinburgh to really get a good look at the medieval life. She especially rued having to leave Silvan and Nell, knowing she'd never see them again, except in portraits on Maggie's castle walls.

But she understood his insistence that they return immediately, and knew that, even if he'd been willing to stay, she wouldn't have been able to enjoy it. Until they found what they needed to save him, she doubted she'd enjoy much of anything.

"Ye will take care of him, won't ye?" Nell said softly.

Chloe glanced over to find both she and Silvan watching her intently.

She smiled. "I love him. I'll be at his side every step of the way," she vowed firmly. "Doona be getting yerself all in a fankle, Silvan," she added in a teasing lilt, hoping to lighten his somber expression. "I'll take care of your son. I promise." Her gaze skimmed back to Dageus. He was carrying Robert while

chasing Ian, and both were squealing with delighted laughter. His dark hair was loose, and his chiseled face fairly blazed with love.

"Believe me, if I have anything to do with it," she added fervently, "I'll be putting my *own* babies in that man's arms."

Nell laughed delightedly. "Now there's a fine lass," she ducked approvingly. Silvan heartily concurred.

Chapter 24

Dageus finished etching the second to last of the formulas necessary to open the white bridge. Though they'd spent weeks in the sixteenth century, they would return to a time in the twenty-first century, a mere three days after the day they'd departed. He would etch the final complex series of symbols when they were ready to go.

Outside the circle of towering megaliths, his da and Nell stood with his wee brothers in their arms. He'd long since said his good-byes. Now Chloe was hugging and kissing them, and both her and Nell's eyes were suspiciously bright. How easily, he marveled, women faced those canyons of grief men were wont to venture far and wide in hopes of circumventing. He wondered if women were, in some intangible way, stronger for it.

While Silvan and Nell gave Chloe messages for Drustan and Gwen, Dageus pondered what he'd discovered last eve, after Chloe had fallen asleep. In the wee hours of the morn, he'd crept back down to the chamber library. He was no fool; he knew his canny father had broken off too abruptly when reading the final passage in the fifth Book of Manannan.

And indeed, there it had been. One crucial bit of information Silvan had opted to keep to himself. Dageus didn't need to ask him, to understand why he'd omitted the telling words. Silvan would argue that a prophecy was no more than a foretelling of a "possible" future. However, Dageus knew (and hadn't Drustan's experience with the seer Besseta proved it?) that the future foretold was the most *likely* future, which meant it was going to be damned difficult to avert.

Inscribed in the fifth Book of Manannan, in a slanted majuscule script, had been his most likely future:

The thirteen shall be made one, and the world will descend into an epoch of darkness more brutal than mankind has ever known. Unspeakable atrocities will be committed in the Draghar's name. Civilization will fall and ancient evils rise, as the Draghar pursue their unceasing quest for vengeance.

He would never permit such a future to become reality. Chloe's love had strengthened him and hope burned like a beacon in his heart. Though the

darkness was ever growing in him, his resolve and determination had never been stronger.

He glanced at her, drinking her in. For their return, they'd donned the clothing they'd worn in the twenty-first century, and she stood in her slim blue treds and creamy sweater, her tousled curls spilling down her back. Desire quickened in his veins. Anon he would be loving her, and every minute betwixt now and then was a minute too long.

He'd warned her how opening the bridge would affect him.

I won't be... quite myself, Chloe. You remember how I was when we came through the first time?

I know, she'd said firmly. *I know what you'll need.*

He'd gritted his teeth. *I may be... rough, love.*

I'm tougher than you think. A pause, then those words he would never tire of hearing: *I love you, Dageus. Nothing will change that.*

She was so wee, yet so strong and determined. She was, quite simply, everything he'd ever wanted.

"Son," Silvan's voice shattered his thoughts, "I'd have a word with you before you go."

Dageus nodded and made his way toward Silvan, who led him toward the castle. He'd already said his good-byes to his da, Nell, and his brothers, and was impatient to go, lest someone weep again and tear at his heart.

"When you return, son, you must tell Drustan about the chamber library."

Dageus blinked, perplexed. "But he'll know. We opened it again, and you'll be passing the knowledge to Ian and—"

"I'll be doing no such thing." Silvan said calmly.

"But why?"

"I spent some time last eve pondering the possibilities. If the chamber library is

made known to the Keltar, it may affect too many things over the next centuries. It must be forgotten. 'Tis too risky for us to restore such a wealth of knowledge to successive generations and think naught else might change. I plan to seal it this very eve and will no' enter it again."

Dageus nodded, instantly seeing the wisdom of it. "Ever clever, you are, Da. I hadn't thought of it, but you're right. It could indeed cause inestimable changes." 'Twas good, he realized then, that he and Chloe weren't remaining in the past any longer. He could trust his father to tidy up any loose ends, if aught were to be found.

Unable to endure a prolonged leave-taking, he turned back toward Chloe and the stones.

"Son," Silvan said, his voice low and urgent.

Dageus kept his back to him. "Aye?" he said tightly.

There was a long pause. "If I could be there with you, I would. A father should be with his son at such times." He swallowed audibly. "Lad," he said softly, "Give my love to Drustan and Gwen, but know you carry the bulk of it with you." Another pause. "I ken a da shouldn't have favorites, but—och, Dageus, my son, you were always mine."

When, a few moments later, Dageus returned to the center slab and began to etch the final symbols, he noticed Chloe staring at him strangely. Her eyes got misty again and her lower lip quivered a bit.

He didn't understand until she pulled his head down to hers and kissed the tear from his cheek.

Then, as the white bridge opened, she flung herself into his arms, clasped her hands behind his neck and kissed him passionately. He pulled her legs around his waist and held her tightly. It became a battle of wills for him then: It was him against the devastating, shifting, dimensional storm. He felt as if—if he could only make it through the chaos of the white bridge without losing hold of her—he could make it through anything.

He held onto her for all he was worth.

"Oomph!" Chloe gasped as they hit the icy ground, still in each other's arms. A fierce little smile curved her lips—they'd made it without letting go of each other! She didn't know why it seemed so important to her, but it did, as if it somehow proved that *nothing* could ever tear them apart.

A low growl, a rough rumble more animal than human, was the only sound Dageus made as he rolled her beneath him and slanted his mouth hard over hers. His body was rock-hard against the softness of hers, his hips grinding into the cradle of her thighs, and in a heartbeat she was breathless with lust. The man had only to look at her to make her feel weak with desire, but when the hot, thick hardness of him rode between her legs, she became mindless with need. Every single time, her mouth went dry, and she felt shaky from head to toe, anticipating all those delicious things he would do to her. All those ways of touching and tasting, all those very specific demands he made of her that she so loved filling.

She yielded, greedily taking all of him, locking her arms around his strong neck, burying her fingers in his wet hair. They rolled and tumbled across the hail-covered ground as the rain poured down and the wind shrieked deafeningly, numb to all around them but the searing intensity of their passion.

Mouth sealed tightly to hers, his kiss was both dominating and yet utterly seductive, demanding yet coaxing. When he slipped his hands beneath her wet sweater, popped the clasp of her bra and cupped her breasts, she panted against his lips. *There*, she thought dimly, *oh, yes*. He played with her nipples, rolling them between his fingers, tugging lightly, and she could feel her breasts swelling beneath his hands, growing excruciatingly sensitive.

When he drew abruptly away, she cried out, reaching for him, trying to pull him back down on her, but he moved out of her grasp, leaning back on his heels at her feet. Her back arched as she stared up at him, his gaze black in the shimmering moonlight. "Please," she gasped.

He gave her a feral smile. "Please what?"

She told him. In detail.

His black eyes glittering, he laughed as she listed her many and varied requests, and she could see that her boldness was making him recklessly aroused. A month ago, Chloe would never have been able to say such things, but what the hell, she

thought, *he'd* made her this way.

His laughter was of short duration. As he listened, desire narrowed his eyes and lust drew his chiseled features taut. He peeled away her jeans and sweater, and stripped off her panties and bra, baring her to his hungry gaze. Then he picked her up and tossed her naked over his shoulder, his big palm possessively roaming over her bare behind. He stalked from the circle of stones, walking with her through the night, deep into the gardens. He stopped at a low stone bench where he deposited her on her feet, ripped open the fly of his jeans and shed them. In a matter of seconds he was gloriously naked.

Then the big, fierce Highlander with wild black eyes who was clearly seething with impatience to be inside her, surprised her by dropping to his knees before her. He planted lazy, open-mouthed kisses on the thin, sensitive skin of her hips, and across her thighs. Gripping her bottom with both hands, he pulled her hips forward, his velvety tongue sliding deep, slipping over her taut bud and deeper still.

Her legs buckled and she cried out his name. He didn't let her go down, but caught her weight, and forced her to remain standing, his dark head between her thighs, his long hair like silk against her skin. Slowly, he turned her in his arms, scattering scorching kisses over every inch of her behind, licking and teasing, his fingers slipping to the wetness between her thighs. Desperate to have him inside her, the minute his grip loosened a bit, she dropped forward to the ground on her hands and knees, and looked invitingly back over her shoulder at him, wetting her lips.

He made a strangled sound, his breath hissing between his teeth. "Och, lass," he chided, "I tried to be gentle."

Then he was on her, covering her with his big, hard body, pushing into her.

"Gentle later," she panted. "Hard and fast now."

As ever, her sexy Highlander was only too willing to oblige.

Much later, heads close together, hands entwined, they borrowed Maggie's Jeep, and drove back to Drustan and Gwen's castle. There they crept into the back entrance, quiet as mice so as not to wake anyone, where they fell into bed and

began the loving all over again.

It was nearly noon by the time Dageus and Chloe ventured belowstairs, and when they did—much to Drustan's irritation—they went straight to the kitchens, evidently famished. He could hear a passel of McFarleys banging about in there, putting together a late brunch.

Drustan shook his head and resumed pacing in the library, scarcely able to contain his impatience. The elderly McFarley butled in, trying to find something he might bring "his lordship," but the only thing his lordship wanted was his damned brother's attention.

He'd been up since dawn, and already a dozen times this morn he'd stalked toward the stairs, yet each time

Gwen had met him at the bottom and firmly turned him back toward the library.

He'd heard them slip in last eve (as if he'd be able to fall asleep on the night Dageus was to return!) and had begun to rise from bed to go to them then, but Gwen had placed her hand on his arm. *Let them have tonight, love*, she'd said. He'd growled, frustrated, eager to share his news and discover what they'd learned, but then she'd begun kissing him and his mind had stuttered the way it always did when she used that luscious mouth of hers on any part of him. Och, and the parts she'd used it on last eve!

He glanced at her. She was curled on the window seat beneath one of the library's bay windows. Rain pattered lightly against the glass. She'd been reading for the past hour, but now she was staring dreamily out the window. Her skin had the unique translucent radiance of a pregnant woman, her breasts were full and tight, her belly heavily rounded with his—*their*—children. Fierce elation and protectiveness flooded him, accompanied by that never-ending need to be holding her, touching her. As if sensing his gaze on her, she turned from the window and smiled at him. He dropped into an armchair near the fireplace and patted his thigh. "Bring your bonny self over here, wee English."

Her smiled deepened and her eyes sparkled. As she slipped from the window seat, she warned him, "I might squish you."

He snorted. "I doona think there's any danger of that, lass." At but a few inches

over five feet, even heavily pregnant, his wife would ne'er be aught but a wee lass in his mind. He pulled her onto his lap and clasped his hands around her, holding her close.

The day was overcast, rainy and chill, a perfect day for a cozy peat fire, and in time, lulled by the combination of the woman in his arms and the comforts of home, he relaxed. He was nearly dozing when Dageus and Chloe finally finished eating and joined them.

Gwen rose from his lap and greetings and hugs were exchanged.

"Silvan and Nell said to give you their love," Chloe told them.

Drustan grinned, noting that Chloe's hair was still slightly damp from her shower. So was his brother's. 'Twas no wonder they'd not come down. Keltar men had a decided penchant for making love in the shower or bath. Indoor plumbing was one of the many luxuries of the twenty-first century that he wasn't sure how he'd lived without. A shower? Delicious. Sex in the shower? Och, life didn't get any better.

Gwen beamed. "Didn't you just love Silvan and Nell? I was so envious that I couldn't go along and see them again."

"Nell gave me a letter for you, Gwen," Chloe said. "It's upstairs. Do you want me to get it now?"

Gwen shook her head. "Drustan might die of impatience if I let you leave the room. We have news—"

"But first," Drustan interjected firmly, "let's hear yours." He studied Dageus carefully. Though his eyes were the color of deeply burnished copper, the outer edges of his irises rimmed with black, there was a sense of peace about him that hadn't been there before. Och, *aye*, Drustan thought, *love could indeed work miracles*. He had no idea how long they'd spent in the past, but it was long enough that they'd fallen head over heels in love. Long enough that they were united as one against the uncertain future.

While Dageus filled them in on what they'd discovered, he listened patiently. When Dageus told him of the chamber library beneath the study in Maggie and

Christopher's castle, he had to grip the arms of his chair to prevent himself from leaping up and racing off to explore it. To touch and read the legendary Compact, to rediscover their lost history.

Finally, it was his turn to tell the news.

"These members of the Druid sect of the Draghar you spoke of," Drustan began.

"Aye?" Dageus encouraged when he paused.

"We have one of them in our dungeon."

Dageus shot to his feet. "How did this come about? Have you questioned him? What did he tell you?" he demanded.

"Easy, brother. He told me all. The base of their Order's operation is in London, in a place called The Belthew Building, on the lower West Side. 'Twas he and his companion that were after Chloe in Manhattan. 'Twas his companion who leaped from your terrace. He followed you here, hoping to get another chance at Chloe. They were trying to provoke you to use magic and force the transformation."

"I'll kill the son of a bitch!" Dageus snarled and began to move toward the door of the library.

"Sit," Chloe said, dashing after him and tugging firmly at his sleeve. "Let's hear the rest of it. You can kill him later."

Bristling with unbridled fury, Dageus refused to move for a moment, then he snorted and followed her back to the sofa. *You can kill him later*, she'd said, almost absently. When he sank back down on the sofa beside her, she snuggled into his arms and patted him like one might soothe a rabid wolf. He shook his head, nonplussed. Sometimes, he mused, it might be nice if she were a *wee* bit intimidated by him.

But not his mate: She feared nothing.

"He admitted"—Drustan smiled with grim satisfaction—"under a bit of duress —"

"Good," Dageus snapped. "I hope'twas excruciating."

"—that the building is constructed atop a labyrinth of catacombs, and in those crypts is where all their records are kept. So far as he knows, the building is commonly occupied by no more than three or four men, and at night, 'tis most oft but two, deep in the heart of it. The building has a security system, yet I believe 'tis naught to present a challenge to someone with your unique skills, brother," he added dryly. "There are complex passkeys, and much to his dismay, he described to me precisely what we must do to pass them. To the best of his knowledge, they still believe you have no idea they exist, and that you do not know of the Prophecy."

"Perfect. It should be a simple matter to break in late at night and search their records and histories. Did you ask if he knew of a way to get rid of the thirteen?"

Drustan frowned. "Aye. Of a certain, I did. 'Twas one of the first things I asked. He indicated there was a way, but he didn't know what it was. He overheard the Master of their Order, a man called Simon Barton-Drew, express concern that you might discover it. I assure you, I probed him thoroughly, but the man has no idea what the method is."

"Then we need to find this Simon Barton-Drew, and I doona give a damn what harm we must do to him to discover what he knows."

Chloe and Gwen nodded their agreement.

"So, when do we leave?" Gwen asked matter-of-factly.

Dageus and Drustan both skewered her with a glare.

"*We* doona," Dageus said firmly.

"Oh, yes, *we* do," Chloe rebutted immediately.

Dageus scowled. "There is no way we're taking the two of you in there—"

"Then just take us to London with you," Gwen said, managing to sound both soothing yet obdurate. "We'll stay in a hotel nearby, but we will *not* remain here while you two go traipsing off into danger. This is not negotiable."

Drustan shook his head. "Gwen, I willna have you takin' risks with either yourself or our bairn, lass," he said, his burr thickened by tension.

"And you should trust that I wouldn't either," Gwen said levelly. "I'm not going to let anything happen to our babies. Chloe and I will stay in the hotel, Drustan. We're not stupid. I know there's not much a woman as pregnant as I am could do when it comes to stealthily breaking in and searching. But you can't leave us here. If you tried to, we'd only follow you. Take us with you, settle us safely in the hotel. You can't shut us out. We're part of it too. It would drive us both crazy sitting here and waiting."

The debate went on for well over half an hour. But in the end, the women prevailed and the men reluctantly agreed to take them to London the following day.

"He's back, Father, as is the woman," Hugh Barton-Drew informed Simon, as he spoke softly into his cell phone. "We saw them return late last night."

"Any idea where they were?" Simon asked.

"None."

"And there's still been no sighting of Trevor?"

"No. But we can't get in the castle. Even if it weren't warded, I'm not certain it would be safe to try," he said quietly. Hushed tones were unnecessary, as far from the castle as he and his brother were, watching through binoculars, but Dageus MacKeltar made him uneasy. This Keltar castle, unlike the other one atop the mountain, was in a vast vale, and the surrounding forest-covered hills provided excellent cover. Still, he felt exposed. His brother had complained of the same sensation.

"Report in to me every two hours. I want to be kept apprised of every move they make," Simon said.

Chapter 25

It was late at night, long after everyone was asleep, that Dageus slipped stealthily from the castle.

The day had seemed to drag on endlessly, while he'd struggled to conceal from those he loved what he was planning. To keep his gaze mild, his impatience in check it had worn him down, comporting himself as if he were in complete agreement, betraying no telltale sign, however minute, to the brother who knew him too well, that he had no intention of going along with the plan they'd spent the rainy afternoon meticulously formulating.

The plan wherein they would all go to London and *all* be in jeopardy.

During the latter part of the afternoon, while Chloe and Gwen had packed for their trip to London—the trip that was never going to happen—he'd gone down to the dungeon and interrogated the man from the sect of the

Draghar himself. He'd used magic to ruthlessly strip the information from his mind, but as Drustan had assured him, although the man knew there was *some* way to re-imprison the thirteen and prevent the transformation, he did not know the specifics of it.

That a way definitely existed was enough to fill Dageus with a heady exhilaration, and a seething impatience to see it done *now*.

The four of them gathered for dinner in the great hall, and shortly thereafter, he swept Chloe back up to bed, where he made love to her until she collapsed, replete in his arms.

He'd held her then, savoring the feel of her in his arms for nearly another hour before he'd finally left their bed.

And now, as he stepped out into the night, he was ready. It was time to face the enemy and finish things for once and for all.

Alone.

He would never permit any of the people he loved to take this risk with him.

'Twas he who'd created the mess and'twould be he who fixed it. He was at his best solitary, unencumbered—the Gaulish Ghost again, a sleek, dark wraith, scarce visible to the human eye—with no need to watch over his shoulder to protect someone else.

He hadn't saved Drustan for Gwen once, only to lose one or both of them now. And he would *never* lose Chloe.

He knew they would be furious, but with luck, it would be over before they even awakened, or at worst, shortly thereafter. He needed it this way, needed to know they were safe in the castle, so he could keep his mind focused on his goal with no distractions.

He would penetrate the Draghar sect's headquarters, search their records, locate Simon Barton-Drew's address, hunt him down, and peel from his mind the information he needed. The thought that he might, in a short time, be free of the exhausting battle he'd been waging for so long was hard for him to comprehend. The idea that, by morning, he might be able to return to Chloe, naught more than a Druid and a man, seemed a dream too good to be true.

But it wasn't. According to Trevor—and a mind so ruthlessly violated was incapable of lying—Simon Barton-Drew knew how to return the ancient ones to that prison from whence they'd come.

The flight to London was short, though it took him several frustrating hours to locate The Belthew Building. He'd not been in London before, with the exception of the airport, and it was confusing to him. He stood outside the unlit building for some time, studying it from back, front, and all sides. It was a large warehouse constructed of stone and steel, with four floors, but from what Trevor had confessed, that which he sought would be found belowground.

He took slow, even breaths of the chill, foggy night air. Moving briskly, silently, he approached the building and worked the lock with a softly murmured phrase. That made twice today that he'd used magic, and he dare use it only sparingly henceforth.

Even now the beings within him were stirring. He could sense them reaching out, as if trying to fathom their surroundings.

He opened the door and slipped partly in, punching the code into the keypad. He was prepared; he had lifted all the knowledge he needed from Trevor's mind and committed it to memory. He knew every sequence of numbers, every alarm to circumvent, every passkey.

Stepping across the threshold, he felt a sudden pinching pain in his chest, deep in a ridge of muscle. He shrugged his shoulder, trying to work the kink out, but it didn't go away and, bemused, he glanced down.

For a moment the sight of the silver dart quivering in his chest simply baffled him. Then his vision swam alarmingly and narrowed to a dim tunnel. Blinking, he stared into the dark room.

"A tranquilizer," a cultured voice informed him politely.

A few moments later, cursing viciously, Dageus crashed to the floor.

He roused—he had no idea how long later—to the sensation of cool stone against his back. As his drug-induced stupor receded slowly, he became aware that he was securely restrained.

He felt strange, but was unable to pinpoint exactly what it was. Something was different inside him. Mayhap the lingering effects of the tranquilizer, he decided.

Without opening his eyes, he flexed minutely, testing his bonds. He was chained to a stone column several feet in diameter. Thick-linked chains bound his arms behind him, around the column's circumference. His ankles were chained together as well, bound again to the base of the column. Without calling upon magic, he could move naught but his head.

Keeping his eyes closed, he listened, noting the different voices that spoke over the next few moments, tallying the numbers of his enemy. Half a dozen, no more. Had they not drugged him, they would never have taken him, and if he could get free, he would have no problem escaping. He reached out with his Druid senses, testing the strength of the chains.

Bletherin' hell, he thought darkly. There was a binding spell on them. He poked at it lightly, testing its strength with magic, not wishing to use more than was necessary. But instead of a subtle, directed probing, a sudden, uncontrolled rush of power ripped through him, far more than he'd meant to use, more than he'd

ever used at a single time before. He felt the instant response of the thirteen; they began murmuring in their incomprehensible language, their voices buzzing like insects inside his skull. He was bombarded with sensations...

Icy darkness. Endless stretches of bickering amongst themselves. Enforced eternal togetherness with no escape. Periods of lucidity, longer periods of madness, until finally there was nothing left but rage and hatred and an all-consuming thirst for vengeance.

His whole body shuddered. 'Twas the strongest taste of them he'd gotten yet and it was so revolting that, had his hands been free, he suspected he would have clawed at his head in a futile effort to gouge them out of his skull.

He realized two things then: the sect of the Draghar was more advanced in Druidry than he'd thought, to weave such a powerful spell into cold iron, and they'd given him something besides a mere tranquilizer. They'd given him some kind of drug that was impairing his ability to control the power within him. He was like a man who'd consumed too much whisky, who could, intending a gentle caress, lash out with a killing blow, out of sheer sloppiness.

And he had no doubt that such a blow would turn him fully dark.

He inhaled shallowly, forcing his senses outward, away from the chaotic buzzing in his mind. He tasted the air, trying to envision the shape of the room from the echo of conversation. It seemed to be low-ceilinged, and long, and there was a faint odor of moss on stone. He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. He was fair certain he was in the catacombs beneath the building.

What a fool he'd been, barging in, underestimating his foe! He'd acted rashly, driven by impatience and a desperate need to protect those he loved. Not once had it occurred to him that the sect of the Draghar might have people watching him, reporting his every move. Apparently they had, for they'd certainly been ready for him. What was their plan? To use this deadly drug to force his transformation?

"He's coming around," someone said.

He would have preferred they continue to think him unconscious, buying precious time for the effects of the drug to diminish, but evidently, though he'd

remained motionless, he'd given himself away somehow. Mayhap his chest was rising and falling more deeply. He opened his eyes.

"Ah, there you are," a tall, lean man with salt-and-pepper hair said, moving to stand before him. The man looked at him for a long moment. "I'm Simon Barton-Drew, master of the sect. This isn't quite how I'd hoped to meet you. My apologies for the restraints but, for the time being, they are necessary. I assume Trevor is dead?" he inquired politely.

"Trevor lives," Dageus said, modulating his voice carefully. He would betray no sign of his inner conflict to the man. "Unlike your Order, the Keltar do not take life without cause." No matter how much he would have liked to.

Simon circled the stone column. "Nor do we. All we've done was necessary to serve the purpose of restoring our rightful powers. To fulfill our destiny."

"They were never your rightful powers. They were given by the Tuatha Dé and they were the Tuatha Dé's to reclaim when it became evident man would abuse them."

Simon gave a short bark of laughter. "Thus speaks the man who broke his own oaths. See it as you wish. No matter, you will lead us."

"I will never fulfill the Prophecy."

"Ah, so you know of it. I wondered if you did. When did you find out? Did Trevor tell you? Not that I blame him, for I know what you're capable of. It's all here." He swept an arm behind him, at piles of manuscripts and texts stacked carefully on dozens of shelves. "All that the Draghar can do. All they will teach us. The power to move through space and time, the power to open the realms."

"The Draghar you worship nearly destroyed the world once, trying to open the realms. What makes you think that once they're free, they won't again?"

"Why destroy the world when they can rule it?" Simon countered. "I believe we can determine what went wrong the last time they tried to go after the Tuatha Dé. Our world is far more advanced now than it was then. And there are so many faithful followers waiting to welcome them."

"What makes you think they have any intention of becoming part of your little

Order? Why would they remain with you?" Dageus goaded.

"What do you mean?" The briefest flicker of unease flashed across the man's lean face.

"If they can travel through time, what is there to prevent them from returning to their own century? What do you think they want more than anything?"

"To reclaim their power. A chance to live again, to rule again. To take their rightful place in the world."

Dageus *tsked* mockingly. Though he couldn't understand their language and didn't know what the Draghar's intentions were, Simon didn't know that. Sowing doubts could be a useful weapon. If he could keep him talking long enough, mayhap enough of the drug's effects would pass that he could risk probing Simon's mind. "They want *bodies*, Simon, and they will have the power to return to their own. Once you release them, how will you stop them from going back? You won't be able to control them. They may destroy your Order the moment I change. What use have they for you? They'll return to their century, keep the war from happening, and utterly rewrite the past four thousand years of history." Dageus laughed. "Like as not, none of us will ever even be born by the time they're done changing things."

Och, aye, the men in the room looked decidedly uneasy. Uneasy was good. Violent dissension would be even better.

"You'll be releasing a power that you can't possibly begin to understand and have no hope of mastering." Dageus gave him a chilling smile.

After a tense silence, Simon waved a dismissive hand. "Enough. I am not going to fall for your ruse. The Draghar would not try to return because they would run the risk of being imprisoned again. They will never risk that."

"So you say, when in truth, you know nothing about them. I do."

Simon's jaw set and he motioned to two of the men standing nearby. "I will not be swayed from the course of the Prophecy. It is my sworn duty to fulfill it. And I may not know as much about the Draghar as I'd like, but I do know much about you." He glanced at the men. "Bring her," he ordered.

The men hastened from the chamber.

Dageus went rigid. Her—*who*? he nearly roared. There was no way, he told himself. Chloe was safe and sleeping within the castle's warded walls.

He was so very wrong.

When they returned a few moments later, his gut clenched. "Nay," he whispered, lips scarce moving. "Och, nay, lass."

"Och, aye, Keltar," Simon mocked. "A lovely woman, isn't she? We tried to get to her in Manhattan. But fear not, you may have all of her you want once you've yielded to the inevitable. I suspect the Draghar will be hungry for a woman after four thousand years."

The men roughly half-dragged, half-carried Chloe forward. Her hands and feet were bound and her face ashen, streaked with tears.

"I'm so sorry, Dageus," she gasped. "I woke up when I heard the car door slam and ran outside, trying to catch you—"

One of the men cuffed her into silence, and every muscle in Dageus's body screamed. He closed his eyes, fighting the dark storm rising in him. *I am a man and a Keltar. I will not lash out blindly*, he told himself over and over again. It was several moments before he managed to open them again and when he did, their gazes locked.

I love you, she mouthed. *I'm so sorry!*

He shook his head, rejecting her apology, hoping she understood that he was saying no apology was necessary. It was his fault, not hers. *I love you too, lass*, he shaped the words silently.

"How touching," Simon said dryly. He motioned the men holding Chloe to bring her forward, stopping them half a dozen paces from the column to which Dageus was bound. "Having a private plane has its uses," he said, smiling. "She was here before you'd even landed in London. And now my men will kill her unless you'd care to prevent it. Being bound should present no obstacle for a man with such power."

"You son of a bitch." Dageus strained violently against the chains, but to no avail. Without magic, he wasn't going anywhere.

Rage consumed him, accompanied by the fierce temptation to use the most horrific power at his disposal. He could taste the potency of the ancient ones, piling up in the back of his throat, begging to be freed. The words that brought death coiled on the tip of his tongue. He wanted blood, and the beings inside him were lusting to spill it.

Simon had planned his strategy well. He'd drugged Dageus so he wouldn't be able to control the amount of magic he used, taken captive the woman Dageus loved more than life itself, and was now going to kill her, unless Dageus used magic to prevent it.

And if he used magic to save her, he would transform.

It was inevitable, he realized with a peculiar detachment. This was it. He was backed into a corner with no way out. There was no way he would permit Chloe to be harmed. Ever. She was his mate, she held his *Selvar*. His life was her shield.

For a split second, a curiously suspended instant in time, it was as if he were there in the catacombs, yet not there. His mind slipped to a quiet place where memories flashed in swift conjunction.

He was seeing Chloe for the first time, standing in the misting rain on a bustling street in Manhattan. He was discovering her beneath his bed. He was feeling the lushness of her lips when he'd stolen that first kiss.

He was feeding her bites of salmon. Listening to her haver incessantly away about some obscure tome, her eyes sparkling. Watching her puff on a fat cigar.

He was seeing her sleepy-sexy eyes when he'd brought her to her first peak on the airplane. Making love to her in a sparkling pool beneath an endless blue sky in his beloved Highlands. Spilling inside her, becoming part of her. Watching, as she perched on a chair and practiced saying that she loved him to a shield, then turning to shout it at him. Saying it again, after he'd told her his darkest secret. Remaining steadfastly at his side.

And in that strange quiet moment, he realized that had he not broken his oath,

had he not gone through the stones to save Drustan, he would never have met Chloe. Ironic, he mused, that his fate had required his own fall to lead him to the woman who'd been his salvation in so many ways. Had he been given the choice, to go back in time and choose not to break his oath and never meet Chloe Zanders, he would have resolutely walked into the stones and done it all over again, with full awareness that it would lead to this moment.

Simply to have the joy of loving Chloe for what time he'd had.

From that quiet place, his mind glided swiftly to another: to the bitterly cold night he'd danced upon his ice-slicked terrace wall. He'd done it because he'd always known that he could end it all by dying. Simple solution, really. No vessel—no resurrection. Mate, endgame, and match.

A part of him had been so weary of fighting.

But he'd resolved that eve to continue fighting, and relegated thoughts of suicide to his arsenal of the last resort, loathing the notion of it.

Then he'd met Chloe, who'd given him a thousand reasons to live.

He smiled bitterly. He couldn't call forth the magic necessary to free her and see her safe without also releasing the Draghar, which put him in an impossible position.

He would never usher in that "epoch of darkness more brutal than mankind has ever known," of which the Prophecy foretold. There was no telling how many millions might die. What if those words he'd taunted Simon with truly were what the thirteen planned to do? What if they *did* intend to go back in time? Mayhap fight the war all over again? Mayhap win this time?

It would utterly change four thousand years of mankind's history. Man might no longer even exist in present times by the time they were done.

Nay. His choices, his chances, had all been exhausted.

Och, love, he grieved, it wasn't supposed to end this way.

When he opened his eyes, it was to discover that they'd stuffed a gag in Chloe's mouth. Her aquamarine eyes sparkled with tears.

"Cut her," Simon said softly. "Show him her blood."

Dageus bit down on his tongue, filling his mouth with a bitter metallic taste. He knew he had to time it to perfection. He had to make certain he inflicted a sufficiently mortal wound on himself that he would die before the transformation was complete, but not before the sect members were dead and Chloe was free. He steeled himself to act with flawless resolution. A single moment of hesitation could undo him. He had to be one hundred percent committed to dying.

And that was a damned hard thing to be when looking at Chloe.

One of the men drew a blade over the skin of her neck, and crimson droplets welled. Chloe writhed in their arms, bucking and struggling.

Now, he told himself, even as he whispered a soft "good-bye" to his mate. Grief flooded him so acutely, so intensely, that he tossed his head back and howled from the very depths of his soul.

Then, for the first time since the eve they'd claimed possession of him, he dropped his guard and stopped resisting the thirteen.

He opened himself up to them. He invited them. He embraced them.

The response was instantaneous. Power, cunning, and madness flooded him. He was suddenly bombarded with bits and pieces of thirteen lives, filled with the phenomenal force of twelve men and one woman whose lust for life had been so intense that they'd wanted to live forever. But far surpassing any sense of them as individuals was their united rage and hatred of their gaolers, a driving incessant determination to see the Tuatha Dé destroyed, even if they had to destroy *all* the realms in the process.

As they swarmed into him, he ripped into Simon's mind, brutally probing. Though the answer would be of no use to him now, he still wanted to know. He wanted to know how things might have played out differently, had he acted less rashly, been wiser.

The answer he discovered made him laugh. The irony of it was rich: he'd come tonight with so much hope, yet now knew that, even had Chloe not been taken, this had always been his only alternative.

Simon indeed knew the way to reimprison the thirteen.

Dageus had to die.

Chloe struggled in her assailants' arms, blinking back tears. She'd been such an idiot, running out of the castle, but damn him for trying to do it alone! How was she to know men would jump on her the moment she walked outside? She'd not even gotten the opportunity to scream and warn Drustan and Gwen that she was being taken.

She chewed desperately on her gag, but it was no use, she couldn't make so much as a whimper. *Oh, Dageus*, she thought helplessly, watching him. He looked at her and his lips moved, but she couldn't make out what he'd said.

Then suddenly he made a sound of raw agony, and his dark head slammed back into the stone column with such force that Chloe nearly stopped breathing, screaming silently inside. His neck arched, and his body strained as if he were being pulled on a rack.

The man called Simon cried out and collapsed to the floor, clutching his head.

Dageus laughed, and the sound chilled Chloe's blood. Dageus had never—*would* never—make such a twisted dark sound. Shaking violently, she watched as his head tipped slowly down. When she saw his eyes, she choked on the gag.

They were almost full black.

A tiny sliver of white rimmed them, hardly there at all. She ceased struggling, frozen by horror.

An icy gale rushed into the chamber, scattering books from the shelves, toppling tables and chairs, whipping sheets of paper and parchment through the air.

Suddenly the two men holding her were gone. The knife at her neck shot away through the air, and she lost sight of it amid the flying debris. The ropes at her wrists and ankles snapped, and the gag was abruptly torn from her mouth.

As if from a far distance, she heard Dageus's voice—but not quite his voice, it was more like dozens of voices layered upon each other—telling her to dose her eyes, telling her that she would see and hear *nothing* till he commanded

otherwise. And she knew that he'd done something to her, used some magic on her, because suddenly she was blind and deaf. Panicked by the loss of her senses, she dropped to the floor and held very still.

That time of sightless silence seemed to go on for an eternity. The only sensation left to her was feeling the chilling caress of that bitter, dark wind.

She huddled on the floor, refusing to contemplate what might be going on. Refusing to believe what she thought she'd seen before all hell had broken loose. She knew Dageus; he would never do such a thing. Not even for her. He was too honorable at the core. He would *never* choose her life over the fate of the world.

Then why had it looked like he was becoming the Draghar?

Chapter 26

Silence was all Chloe heard when she could hear again, though it wasn't exactly silence, for, in contrast to the utter vacuum of deafness, silence was a mishmash of white noise: the faint hum of fluorescent lighting, the soft push of air from dehumidifiers installed to protect the ancient texts. She'd never been so grateful for such simple, comforting sounds in her life. It had been terrifying to be stripped of the ability to both see and hear.

But she still couldn't see, and she suffered another moment of absolute panic before realizing that her eyes were dosed. Opening them, she pushed herself shakily up from the floor into a sitting position. Her gaze flew to the stone column, but Dageus was no longer chained to it. Frantically, she skimmed the room.

Once, twice, three times she looked through the wreckage.

And jerked her head in abject denial.

There was blood all over the place. Puddles of it. Still more sprayed across the tables and chairs, and the chaos of books and papers on the floor.

Yet more blood on the stone column.

And there wasn't a single other person—not even a body—in the room with her.

*Time is a companion that goes with us
on a journey. It reminds us to cherish each moment,
because it will never come again.
What we leave behind is not as important as
how we have lived.*
—JEAN LUC PICARD, captain of the *Enterprise*

Chapter 27

"I don't want you to go," Gwen said for what Chloe was certain must be the hundredth time. "*Please*, stay with us, Chloe."

Chloe shook her head wearily. Over the past two weeks, she and Gwen had grown close, which both soothed and chafed, for it made Chloe think about how incredible her life could have been if things had worked out differently. She had no doubt that she and Dageus would have gotten married, remained in Scotland, and bought a house near Gwen and Drustan. She and Gwen were similar in many ways, and in time Gwen would have become the sister she'd never had.

What a perfect, blissful dream that would have been! Living in the Highlands, surrounded by family, married to the man she loved.

But everything had gone so *damn* wrong and those things would never be, and her growing affection for the brilliant, nurturing woman who'd stayed tirelessly at her side since that terrible night, had begun to hurt more than it helped.

"I've stayed as long as I can, Gwen," Chloe said, continuing her grimly determined march toward the security gate. They were in the airport, and she was desperate to be in the air, to escape so many painful reminders. If she didn't get out of there soon, she was afraid she might start screaming and just never stop. She couldn't look at Drustan one more time. Couldn't bear being in the castle Dageus had built.

Couldn't bear being in Scotland without him even one more second.

It had been two weeks since the horrible night that she'd been awakened by the sound of a car door slamming. Two weeks since she'd run outside after him, only to be taken hostage by sect members who'd been waiting for just such an opportunity.

Two weeks since she'd fled, sobbing, from the heart of the catacombs, and stumbled out of The Belthrew Building to call Gwen and Drustan from a pay phone.

Two weeks since they'd joined her in London and searched every inch of the

damned building.

At first, when Gwen and Drustan had taken her back to Castle Keltar, she'd been in shock, incapable of talking. She'd huddled in a darkened bedchamber, dimly aware that they were hovering nearby. Eventually, she'd managed to tell them what had happened—the part of it she'd seen—then she'd curled in bed, replaying it over and over in her mind, trying to fathom what had *really* transpired.

Realizing that they would never know for sure.

All they knew for certain was that Dageus was gone.

For two weeks, Chloe lived in a kind of excruciating suspension, a bundle of tension and grief... and treacherous hope. It wasn't as if she'd actually *seen* his dead body. So, maybe...

So, nothing.

Two weeks of waiting, praying, hoping against hope.

And each day of watching Gwen and Drustan together had been the purest kind of hell. Drustan touched Gwen with Dageus's hands. He lowered Dageus's face to kiss her. He spoke with Dageus's deep, sexy voice.

And he wasn't Dageus. He wasn't hers to hold, though he looked like he should be. He was Gwen's, and Gwen was pregnant, and Chloe wasn't. She knew, because Gwen had persuaded her to take an EPT a few days ago, arguing that if she tested positive it would give her something to hold onto. Unfortunately, she hadn't gotten the cheery news Gwen had gotten seven months ago.

Her test result had been negative.

Like her life. A great big fat negative.

"I don't think you should be alone," Gwen protested.

She tried to smile reassuringly, but from the look on Gwen's face, she suspected she'd managed only a frightening baring of teeth. "I'll be okay, Gwen. I can't stay here any longer. I can't stand seeing..." She trailed off, not wanting to hurt Gwen's feelings.

"I understand," Gwen said, wincing. She'd felt much the same when she'd thought Drustan was forever lost to her, and had met his descendants. She could only imagine what Chloe must feel each time she looked at Dageus's twin. And Chloe didn't have the promise of his babies to cling to as she'd had.

The worst of it was, there were no answers. Dageus was simply gone. Gwen had dung to hope too, in those first few days, until Drustan had confided that since the night his brother had disappeared he'd not been able to feel the unique twin-bond he and Dageus had always shared.

They'd decided not to tell Chloe that just yet. Gwen still wasn't sure they'd made the right decision. She knew a part of Chloe was still hoping.

"We'll be coming to Manhattan in a few weeks, Chloe," Gwen told her, hugging her tightly. They clung to each other for a time, then Chloe tore herself away and practically ran to the security gate, as if she couldn't get out of Scotland fast enough.

Gwen wept for her as she watched her go.

The Maybe Game, Chloe swiftly came to realize, was the crudest game of all, far worse than the What-Might-Have-Been Game.

The Maybe Game was parents who left for dinner and a movie and never came home again. The Maybe Game was a closed-casket funeral and a four-year old's imagination when confronted with sleek, glossy boxes and the attendant, bewildering rituals of death.

The Maybe Game was an empty *freaking* room full of blood and no answers.

Maybe Dageus had used the power of the Draghar to free her, to kill the sect members, and magically transport their bodies elsewhere so she wouldn't be confronted with the horror, where he'd then killed himself to make certain the Prophecy would never be fulfilled.

That was what Drustan believed. And deep down inside her heart, that was what Chloe believed as well. In her heart, she knew Dageus would never risk freeing the ancient evil to walk the earth again. Not even for her. It had nothing to do with love. It had everything to do with the fate and future of the entire world.

She'd endlessly replayed in her mind that moment when the knife had whipped away from her neck and gone hurtling through the air.

It had gone in his direction.

But *maybe*, another insidious little voice kept insisting, he and the sect of the Draghar had vanished one another...er, inadvertently, and... they would all come back. Eventually. Stranger things could happen. Stranger things happened on *Buffy* all the time. Maybe they were locked somewhere in mortal combat or something.

Maybe, her mind tortured her, *he's still alive somewhere, somehow*. That was the most excruciating maybe of all.

How many years had she believed that her parents would one day walk through the front door again? When Grandda had come to take her to Kansas, she'd been terrified to go. She still remembered shrieking at him that she couldn't leave because *when Mommy and Daddy come home they won't know where to find me!*

For years she'd dung to that agonizing hope, until she'd finally been old enough to understand what death was.

"Oh, Zanders," she whispered. "You can't play the Maybe Game. You know what it does to you."

She had no idea how many days she huddled in her tiny apartment, completely withdrawing from the world. She didn't answer the phone, she didn't check her E-mail or mail, she rarely even stirred from bed. She passed her time mentally reliving every precious moment she and Dageus had spent together.

She'd had the most incredible month of her life, she'd met the man of her dreams and fallen head over heels in love. She'd had the promise of a blissful future. She'd held everything that she'd ever wanted right there in the palms of her hands, and now she had nothing.

How was she supposed to go on? How was she supposed to face the world? To get dressed, to maybe brush her hair, to go out on the sidewalk and see lovers talking and laughing with each other?

Impossible.

And so the days crept by in a bleak fog until one morning she woke up obsessed with wanting the artifacts he'd given her, in her apartment. Needing to hold the *skean dhu*, to wrap her fingers around it in the same places his had once rested.

Which meant leaving her apartment. She tried to think of some other way to get them, but there was none. Only she could access the safety deposit box.

Numbly, she dragged herself to the shower, got sort of wet, then sort of dry, then stumbled to the suitcase she still hadn't unpacked. She tugged on rumpled clothes that may or may not have matched—frankly, she didn't care, at least she wasn't naked and wouldn't get arrested, which would have forced her to speak to people, something she had no desire to do—and took a cab to the bank.

Within a short time she was ushered into a private room with her safety deposit box. She looked at it for a long while, just standing and staring, trying to summon the immense energy necessary to root around in her purse for her wallet. Eventually, she rummaged about for the key and unlocked the long metal box.

She opened it, and froze, staring. Atop her short sword, *skean dhu*, Keltar brooch, and intricately etched first-century arm band, lay an envelope with her name on it.

In Dageus's handwriting.

She closed her eyes, frantically shutting the sight of it out. She hadn't been prepared for that! Merely seeing his handwriting made her heart feel as if it were breaking all over again.

She took several slow, deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

Opening her eyes, she reached for the envelope with trembling hands. What on earth might he have written to her so many weeks ago? They'd only known each other five days before she'd left for Scotland with him!

She untucked the flap and withdrew a single sheet of paper.

Chloe-lass:

If I'm not here with you now, I'm beyond this life, for'tis the only way I'll ever let

you go.

She flinched, her whole body jerking. Several long moments passed before she managed to force herself to keep reading.

I hoped I loved you well, sweet, for I know even now that you are my brightest shining star. I knew it the moment I saw you.

Ah, lass, you so adore your artifacts.

This thief covets but one priceless treasure: You.

Dageus

She squeezed her eyes shut as fresh pain lanced through her. The knot in her throat swelled, the burning behind her eyes grew excruciating—yet, still, she refused to cry. There was a perfectly good reason that she hadn't cried since the night he'd disappeared. She knew that if she cried, it would mean he was really gone.

Which also seemed to imply, in perhaps a less than logical way, that as long as she didn't cry, there was hope.

Oh, God, she could picture him! She could see them both, standing in the bank that day. He was tall, dark, and too gorgeous for words. She was so excited, so thrilled and nervous. So fascinated by him.

So distrustful, too, of the dastardly, impossibly sexy Gaulish Ghost. She'd watched every move he made, to be certain he *really* put her precious artifacts in the box before he locked it and gave her the key.

Still, he'd managed to slip the letter in at the last moment without her seeing it.

Even then. He'd wanted her even then. He'd said, even then, that he would never let her go.

"Ma'am?" a brisk voice interrupted. "My apologies for disturbing you, but they just informed me that you'd arrived. Is Mr. MacKeltar with you?"

Chloe opened her eyes slowly. The bank manager was standing in the doorway. She wasn't ready to talk to anyone yet, so she shook her head.

"Well, then, he asked me to give you this, should you come to collect the contents of the box without him." He handed her a set of keys. "He said he wanted you to have"—he shrugged, regarding her with open curiosity—"whatever it is these keys open. He said it was paid for, and if you didn't wish to retain ownership, you could sell it. He expressed his conviction that it would keep you quite comfortably for the rest of your life." He scrutinized her intently. "Mr. MacKeltar has fairly sizeable accounts in our bank. Might I inquire as to his intentions about those?"

Chloe took the keys with a trembling hand. They were the keys to his penthouse. She shrugged, to indicate that she had no idea.

"Are you all right, ma'am? You look pale. Are you feeling sick? Could I get you a glass of water or a soft drink or something?"

Chloe shook her head again. She tucked the letter in her pocket and slipped the carefully wrapped *skean dhu* in her purse. The rest of the artifacts she would leave in the bank until she had what she felt was a safe place to keep them.

They would *never* be sold. She would not part with so much as one precious memory.

She eyed the keys, feeling strangely numb. How carefully he'd planned, how far ahead he'd been looking, even then. Leaving her his penthouse, as if she could ever bear to live there. Or sell it. Or even think about it.

"Ma'am, I've noticed that we have no next of kin listed in Mr. MacKeltar's files —"

"Oh, hush, just hush, would you?" Chloe finally managed, pushing past him. She was dying inside, and all he cared about was whether his bank might lose Dageus's money. It was more than she could stand. She left both box and bank manager without a backward glance.

She wandered the city for a time, pushing blindly through the masses of people, with no concept of where she was walking. Head down, she walked while the sun passed the noon hour, descended behind the skyscrapers, and slipped to the horizon.

She walked until she was too exhausted to take another step, then she slumped

down on a bench. She couldn't bear the thought of going back to her apartment, she couldn't bear the thought of going to Dageus's penthouse. She couldn't bear the thought of being anywhere, or even *being* for that matter.

Yet... she mused, perhaps it would help. Perhaps merely being surrounded by his things, smelling him on his pillows again, touching his clothes—

Would be agonizing.

At complete odds with herself, she got up and began walking aimlessly again.

Night had fallen and a full moon graced the sky by the time Chloe found herself entering the elegant foyer of Dageus's building. She hadn't exactly made the decision to go there, she'd simply walked until her feet had taken her someplace.

So, she thought dismally, *here I am. Ready or not*. She trudged past the security desk, numbly waving the keys at them. They shrugged—they really *should* be fired—she thought as she keyed the elevator to the forty-third floor.

When she stepped into the anteroom, her legs got shaky and, in her mind, she was reliving it all over again. The first day she'd stood at his door, clutching the third Book of Manannan, calling the man she was to deliver it to every nasty name she could think of. Worrying that some bimbo might damage the tome. Scoffing over the gold hinges. Entering his home and seeing the claymore hanging above the fireplace—the artifact that had lured her to her destiny.

Getting caught beneath his bed. Pretending to be a French maid.

Being kissed by him that first time.

Oh, what she wouldn't give to be able to go back in time and live it all over again! She'd settle for any *one* of those days. And if she had it to do all over again, she'd never resist his seduction. She'd drink greedily of each moment.

But such a wish was futile. Neither she nor anyone else was ever going back in time again.

Drustan had told her that the night Dageus had disappeared, he'd felt the bridge in the circle of stones go dead. He'd said it was as if an energy he'd sensed all his life was simply gone. The next day, he and Christopher had discovered that the

tablets that held the sacred formulas were also gone, as was their recall of the ones they'd committed to memory as part of their training.

Whatever Dageus had done that night, he'd accomplished one thing he'd wanted. The Keltar no longer bore the duty of guarding the secret of time travel. They were finally free of the immense responsibility and the temptation. Able, at last, to live simpler lives.

How Dageus would have loved that, she thought with a sad smile. He'd wanted nothing more than to be a simple man. To wear his clan colors again. And though he'd never said it, she knew he'd wanted children. Wanted his own family as much as she had.

How could life have cheated me like this? she wanted to scream.

Steeling herself for the onslaught of yet more painful memories, she unlocked the door (wonder of wonders, he'd actually locked it when they'd left) and pushed it open. She went straight to the fireplace and ran her fingers over the cool metal of the claymore.

She had no idea how long she stood there in the dark, bathed only by the faint light of the full moon spilling in the wall of windows, but eventually, she tossed her purse to the floor, and dropped down on the sofa.

Later, she would brave the rest of his penthouse. Later, she would drag herself up to his magnificent bed and fall asleep, wrapped up in the scent of him.

Chloe-lass: If I'm not here with you now, I'm beyond this life, for'tis the only way I'll ever let you go.

And there it was. He'd said it himself in the letter he'd left her.

Chloe made a small, helpless choking sound.

And finally the tears came in a hot rush. He was dead. He was really, truly gone.

She curled into a tight knot on the sofa and wept.

Chapter 28

Chloe was awakened some time later by an unfamiliar, persistent noise. It took her several moments to pinpoint the source, to understand that the scrabbling sound was coming from the door of the penthouse.

Rubbing her eyes, she pushed herself into a sitting position on the sofa. She'd cried herself to sleep and her eyes were swollen, her face crusty with tears. She peered into the darkness toward the door and listened intently.

Oh, God, she thought, horrified, it sounded like someone was trying to break in!

She listened a few more moments. Yes, that *was* it. She could hear the metallic grating as someone tried to pick the lock. She counted her blessings that she'd bestirred herself from grief enough to flip the inner lock when she'd come in.

Oh, for heaven's sake, she thought, suddenly exasperated, *what is this? My year of misery? Is every bad thing that could possibly happen to me, going to?*

She was not going to be victimized again. Period. Chloe Zanders had had entirely enough. There was only so much a girl could tolerate. She was suddenly dangerously furious at whoever was outside that door, daring to mess up her life even further.

How dare anyone give her more grief?

Dimly aware that she might not be acting quite rationally, but beyond caring, she slipped from the sofa, snatched the claymore from the prongs above the hearth and crept toward the door.

She briefly contemplated pounding on it, in hopes of scaring the intruder away, but swiftly decided that as isolated as the penthouse level was, the intruder might break in anyway and she would have sacrificed her advantage of surprise.

So she stood quietly behind the door and waited. It wasn't long before she heard clicks as the tumblers slipped and the lock turned. Sucking in a shallow breath, she balanced on the balls of her feet, crouching low for a solid stance, and raised the heavy sword with both hands.

The door opened slowly and a dark shape slipped in.

Swiftly, and perhaps harder than she'd intended, Chloe whipped the blade of the sword to his throat. She heard a swift intake of air, and suspected, as sharp as the blade was, she'd cut him.

Good, she thought.

"Och, Chloe-lass, please put the blade down," Dageus said softly.

Chloe screamed.

Keltar mates ne'er come easily to their men. Some travel distances too vast and strange to fathom, others travel but a short path, though a far distance in their hearts. Most resist every step of the way, yet for each Keltar, one woman will make that journey. 'Tis up to the Keltar to claim her.

Silvan lay the tiny tome he'd found in the chamber library upon his lap. It was the only tome he'd risked removing from the chamber before sealing it. Now, ensconced in what had once been his bedchamber and private sanctuary—the tower library one hundred and three steps above the castle proper—he'd finished reading it. The book did not name its scribe, as did most in a request for a blessing upon he who'd scribed the words therein, and was comprised of only a few dozen tiny sheets of parchment. Yet those few sheets, a compendium on the mating of the Keltar males, had been fascinating.

And why haven't you claimed your mate, old man?

The answer to that was complicated, he brooded, glancing about the tower chamber.

Fat pillars of candles scattered across several small tables burned brightly, flickering in the warm night breeze, and he smiled, looking around his peaceful haven. As a lad, he'd delighted in everything about the tower, the spiraling stairs, the stones walls with their myriad cracks and crevices covered with thick tapestries, the breathtaking beauty of the view from the tall window in the spacious circular room. As an old man, he found it no less enchanting.

He'd sat in this same deep chair gazing out into the night as a man of a mere

score of years, then two, and now three plus a few odd ones. He knew every wrinkle and rise of the land beyond his window. As much as he loved it, however, the solitude he'd sought as his salvation had in time become his prison, and he'd been more than ready to leave it a few years ago when he'd wed Nell and moved down into the castle proper.

Still, there were evenings, like this one, when he craved the lofty heights and a quiet place to think. Dageus and Chloe had left nearly a moon before, and he wondered how much time would have to pass before he finally accepted that he would ne'er know what had become of his son. Though he believed Dageus would do aught that must be done, not knowing the final outcome would plague him to the end of his days.

And Nellie too. The atmosphere in the castle had been somber indeed since they'd gone.

Nellie. How she'd blessed his life. Without her, he'd have lost both his sons and been living alone high atop the Keltar mountain.

Anon, he would blow out the candles and make his way down the winding stairs. He would go first to the nursery where their sons would be slumbering by now. He would sit beside them as he did every eve, and marvel over them. Marvel over the second chance at life he'd gotten when he'd least expected it.

He flipped open the tome to the page where his finger held the place.

The exchange of the binding vows will seal their hearts together for all eternity, and once mated, they can never love another.

And that was the crux of his problem. He'd not fully claimed his mate because of the age difference betwixt them. He knew he would die before her. Possibly long before her.

And then what? She wouldn't remarry because he was gone? She would spend the next score or two of years alone? The thought of her lying with another man made him nigh crazed, yet the thought of her lying alone in bed for so many years made him equally crazed. Nellie should be loved, cherished, petted, and caressed. She should be savored and... and... and—och! 'Twas an impossible conundrum!

It should be her choice, his conscience prodded.

"I'll think on it," he grumbled.

And if you die before you finish thinking on it?

Scowling, he slipped the tome into one of the clever pouches Nellie had stitched for him inside the blue robes he favored and was about to rise when he became aware of a presence in the room, standing just behind his shoulder.

He went motionless, reaching out with his Druid senses to identify the intruder, but whoever or whatever it was that stood behind him, defied his comprehension.

"Sit, Keltar," a silvery, lilting voice said.

He sat. He wasn't certain if he'd chosen to comply, or if her voice had robbed him of will.

As he sat tensely waiting, a woman stepped forward from the shadows behind him. Nay, a... och, a being. Wonderingly, he cocked his head, staring up at her. The creature was so brilliant, so lovely that he could scarce gaze upon her. She had eyes of iridescent hues, colors impossible to name. Hair of spun silver, a delicate, elfin, inhumanly beautiful face. He suddenly wondered if he'd gotten a bit of bad beef for dinner and was suffering some instability of the mind induced by poisoned digestion. Then a worse fear gripped him, one that made his head feel alarmingly light and his blood pound too fast inside his chest: mayhap'twas his time, and this was Death, for she was certainly beautiful enough to lure any man to that great unknown that lay beyond. He could hear his own breath coming too fast and harsh, could feel his hands going curiously tingly, as if they were about to go numb. A cold sweat broke out on his skin.

I canna die now, he thought dimly. *I haven't claimed Nellie*. He wouldn't be able to bear it, he thought, blinking enormously heavy eyelids. They might never find each other again. He might be forced to suffer a hundred lives without her. 'Twould be the purest hell!

"Aoibheal, queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, bids you greeting, Keltar."

His vision blurred alarmingly, and his last thought before... er, before the stress

of the moment temporarily leeched him of his wits, was relief that he wasn't dying, and fury at himself for missing even a second of what was surely the most thrilling event in his entire life.

The legendary Tuatha Dé Danaan had come! And what did the grand Keltar laird do?

Fainted like a willy-nilly peahen.

A few minutes later, Chloe was sitting on the sofa with her head between her knees, trying desperately to breathe.

Dageus was at her feet, his hands wrapped around her calves. "Lass, let me get a paper bag, you're hyperventilating."

"Don't you"—*pant-pant*—"DARE"—*pant-pant*—"leave me!" She clutched at his shoulders.

"I doona plan to leave you ever again, love," he said soothingly, stroking her hair. "I'm but going to the kitchen for a bag. Try to relax, sweet."

Chloe nearly screamed again out of sheer frustration. Relax. *As if*. She needed to hold him, to kiss him, to demand to be told what in the world was going on, but she couldn't get a deep enough breath to manage anything.

Standing there at the door, when she'd heard his voice slicing through the darkness, she'd nearly fainted. The sword had clattered from her suddenly lifeless hands, her knees had turned to butter, and her lungs had simply stopped functioning properly. She'd thought hiccups were awful, but she'd take them over hyperventilating *any day*.

And she'd cut him! There was a thin line of blood on his neck. She tried to dab at it, but he caught both her hands in one of his, pressed them gently to her lap, then began moving toward the kitchen. She craned her head sideways and watched him go. How could this be? How was he alive? Oh, God, he was *alive*!

She couldn't take her eyes off him, and twisted around, following his progress, not letting him out of her sight for a minute. He was here. He was really here. He was real. She'd touched him.

She knew, from how ashen his face was, that her inability to get a deep breath was scaring him. It was scaring her too, so she forced herself to concentrate on unknotting inside.

By the time he returned with the paper bag, although she was still trembling visibly, she was managing complete breaths. She stared up at him, tears of joy spilling down her cheeks.

"How? How is this possible?" she cried, flinging herself into his arms.

"Och, lass," he purred, catching her in his embrace. He ducked his head and brushed his lips to hers. Once, twice, a dozen times. "I thought I'd lost you forever, Chloe," he groaned.

"You? So did I!"

More frantic kisses, deep and hungry. She locked her hands behind his neck, savoring the solidity of him, the warm press of his body against hers—a thing she'd thought she would never get to feel again.

Finally, Dageus murmured against her lips, "How did you get here, lass? How did you get back from Scotland so quickly?"

"Quickly?" Chloe drew back and gaped at him. "Dageus, it's been three and a half *weeks* since you disappeared." Just thinking about those awful weeks was enough to make her start crying again.

He gazed down at her, stunned. "Three and a half—ah! So that's what the queen meant," he exclaimed.

"The queen? What queen? What happened? Where have you been? And why were you picking the lock? Why didn't you just—oh!" She broke off and gazed deep into his exotic, sensual golden eyes.

Golden.

"Oh, Dageus," she breathed. "They're gone, aren't they? You're not just alive—you're *free*, aren't you?"

He flashed her a dazzling smile and laughed exultantly. "Aye, lass. They're gone. Forever. And as for picking the lock, since they're gone, I no longer know their

spells. I'm afraid my thieving days are over, lass. Will you still be having me as little more than a man? A simple Keltar Druid, naught more?"

"Oh, I'll have you, Dageus MacKeltar," Chloe said fervently. "I'll have you any way I can get you."

It took dozens of kisses before she was finally calm enough—and convinced enough that he was real—that she let him pull her down onto his lap on the sofa and tell her what had happened.

When Silvan regained consciousness and stirred in his chair, the queen was sitting across from him, watching him intently.

"You're real," he managed to say.

She looked mildly amused. "It was recently drawn to my attention that perhaps we should not have left you so completely unguided. That perhaps you'd begun to think we weren't real. I wasn't convinced. I am now."

"What are you, precisely?" Silvan asked, abjectly fascinated.

"That would be difficult to explain in your language. I could show you, but you didn't fare so well with this form, so I think not."

Silvan stared at her, trying to commit every detail of her to memory.

"Your son is free, Keltar."

Silvan's heart leapt. "Dageus triumphed over the Draghar? Did he succeed in reimprisoning them?"

"In a manner of speaking. Suffice to say, he proved himself."

"And he lives?" Silvan pressed. "Is he with Chloe?"

"I gave him back to the woman who chose him as her consort. He can never return to this century. Already time has been altered more than is wise."

Silvan's mouth opened and closed several times as he tried to decide what to say. Nothing remotely intelligent occurred to him, so finally he settled for a simple,

"Thank you for coming to tell me this." He was utterly flummoxed that the queen of the legendary race had bothered to come tell him.

"I didn't come to tell you this. You appeared weak upon awakening. I thought to increase your strength with glad tidings. We have work to do."

"We do?" His eyes widened.

"There is the small matter of a broken Compact. Broken in this century on the Keltar side. It must be resealed, here and now."

"Ah," he said.

"So you *did* take the knife from my neck," Chloe said, sniffing and wiping her eyes with a tissue. He'd told her everything: how the sect of the Draghar had drugged him with a potion that had made it impossible for him to control the use of magic, how he'd realized when they'd brought her in that he had only one choice left.

As she and Drustan had both suspected, Dageus had been honorable to the last—he'd tried to kill himself. "You were going to die and *leave* me," she hissed, thumping his chest with her fist. "I could almost hate you for that." She sighed gustily, knowing she loved him for it too. His honor was an integral part of him, and she wouldn't have him any other way.

"Believe me, lass, 'twas the most difficult thing I've ever forced myself to do. Bidding you farewell nigh ripped my heart to pieces. But the alternative was releasing something that might ultimately destroy—not only the world—but you as well. Think you I didn't suffer a thousand deaths fearing what the Draghar might do to you if I failed to die before they took me over? Verily, I never want to endure such fears again." He ran his hands up her arms, swept them into her hair and kissed her hard and demanding, his tongue gliding deep.

When they were both breathless, she said, "So what happened then?" She traced her fingers over his face, savoring the feel of his rough, unshaven jaw, the softness of his sinfully sensual lips. And oh—the sight of those clear, golden tiger-eyes with no shadows!

He told her that he'd used magic to rob her of vision and hearing so she wouldn't

be forced to watch him change and die. A mere moment after he drove the knife into his heart, a man and a woman—of sorts—had appeared. The Tuatha Dé Danaan themselves.

"The Tuatha Dé came? You actually *met* them?" Chloe nearly shouted.

"Aye." Dageus smiled at the expression of insatiable curiosity on her face. He suspected he'd be forced to repeat this portion of his story dozens of times over the next fortnight, so she could be certain she hadn't missed a single detail.

"They did something to the fallen sect members that made them disappear. I've no idea where they went. My chains fell away and the next thing I knew, they'd taken me somewhere... else. I was dimly aware that I was lying on a beach near an ocean in a place that was... unlike any other place I've ever been. The colors around me were so brilliant—"

"What about *them*?" Chloe exclaimed impatiently. "What were the Tuatha Dé like?"

"Not human, for a certainty. I suspect they truly doona look like us at all, though they choose to appear in a similar fashion. They are much as the legends describe them: tall, willowy, mesmerizing to behold. Verily, they are difficult to look at directly. Had I not been bleeding and so weak, like as not, their appearance would have fashed me far more than it did. They were immensely powerful. I could feel it in the air around them. I'd thought the ancient Druids possessed of great power, but they were mere dust motes compared to the Tuatha Dé."

"And? What happened?"

"They healed me." Dageus then explained what they'd done and why.

The woman had identified herself as the queen of the Tuatha Dé. She'd said that, though he'd broken his oath and used the stones for personal motive, he'd absolved himself by being willing to take his own life to prevent the Prophecy from being fulfilled. She'd said that by his actions, he'd proved himself worthy of the Keltar name, and hence was being given a second chance.

Dageus smiled wryly. "You should have seen me, Chloe-lass, lying there, believing that I was dying and never going to see you again, then realizing not

only was she going to free me, but she planned to heal me and return me to you." He paused, pondering what else had transpired, but he couldn't think of a way to explain it because it hadn't made full sense to him.

He suspected it never would. There'd been a thick tension between the queen and the other Tuatha Dé, whom she'd called Adam. As he'd lain there, the queen had instructed Adam to heal him, but Adam had protested that Dageus was too near death. Adam had argued that it would cost him too much to save the mortal's life.

The queen replied that such was the price she was claiming due for the formal plea Adam had lodged—whatever that had meant.

The male Tuatha Dé had not been pleased. Verily, for such an otherworldly being, he'd seemed mortally horrified by her decree.

"What? What aren't you telling me?" Chloe said impatiently, cupping his face with her hands.

"Och,'tis naught, lass. I was just thinking there were undercurrents betwixt the two Tuatha Dé that I didn't fathom. At any rate, Adam healed me and the queen lifted the souls of the Draghar from my body and destroyed them."

Chloe sighed happily. "Is that when she closed the stones?"

"Aye. She said she'd reconsidered and decided the power to move through time was not one man should yet possess."

"So why did it take you so long to get back here?"

"Chloe-love, for me, but a few hours have passed since that moment in the catacombs. Only when you told me that it's been nearly a month, did I understand what the queen meant when she said that time didn't pass the same way in our realms."

"So that part of the legend is true too!" Chloe exclaimed. "The ancient tales claim that a single year in the Tuatha Dé's realm is roughly a century in the mortal world."

"Aye. Theirs is a different dimension." He paused, staring down at her with a

troubled gaze. He took in the sight of her swollen eyes, her reddened nose. "Och, lass, you've been grieving me for a long time," he said sadly. "I wouldn't have had such a thing happen. What did you do?"

"I waited with Gwen and Drustan and—oh! We have to call them!" She tried to squirm from his lap for the phone, but he tightened his arms around her, refusing to let her go.

"Anon, love. I'm so sorry you suffered. If I'd known—"

"If you'd known, what? If this is what had to happen so I could have you back, I don't have a single regret. It's okay. You're *here* now, and that's all that matters. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"I could," Dageus said quietly.

Chloe blinked, looking confused and a bit wounded.

Dageus kissed her tenderly. "I've been wanting to ask you this for so long, but I feared I may not have a future to promise you. I do now. Will you marry me, Chloe-lass? Here, at this moment, in the Druid way?"

And so commenced one of the most thrilling hours of Silvan MacKeltar's life. He sat across from the queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan and renegotiated terms. It was fascinating; it was frustrating because she would tell him nothing of herself; it was exhilarating. She was clever, and immensely powerful, tenfold what he'd sensed in the Draghar.

There was no need to ask that the power of the stones be removed from their duties, for he'd felt them close shortly after Dageus had left. The ancient circle of stones had felt abruptly dead. Void of energy, left with a mere brush of presence that made them seem slightly more *there* than the surrounding landscape. When he inquired about it, she merely said that she'd reconsidered the Keltar's duties.

They squabbled a bit—he squabbled with the queen!—over a few minor points. Mostly because it was rather like a game of chess and finessing for the advantage was as much a part of her nature as it was his.

Gold was required, the amount unimportant, the queen told him, as it was simply

a token, to be melted and added to the original Compact. Naught else was at hand, so he pledged the ring Nellie had given him on their wedding day.

Though she'd steadfastly refused to answer any of his questions about their race, she advised him that henceforth she would personally attend one Keltar in every generation so they would never lose sight of their place in things again.

And so The Compact was pledged anew and the responsibility of the stones was bid a grateful farewell, to be suffered again only on the day—and Silvan hoped it would not come for a very, very long time—that man discovered such dangerous secrets on his own.

When all was done and the queen had vanished, Silvan went in search of Nellie.

He had so much to tell her, yet first, there was an entirely different matter weighing heavily on his mind. In that moment he'd thought he was dying, he'd realized what a fool he'd been. He had to try. He had to at least offer, and let Nellie choose whether or not she wanted him forever.

He found her in their bedchamber, fluffing the pillows, preparing for bed. In his eyes, there was no woman more beautiful. In his heart, there was none more perfect.

"Nellie," he said softly.

She glanced up and smiled. It was a smile that said she loved him, a smile that beckoned him to join her in their bed.

Hurrying to her side, he plucked the pillow from her hand and tossed aside. He wanted her full attention.

And now that he had it, he found himself unaccountably nervous. He cleared his throat. He'd prepared, he'd rehearsed a dozen times what he was going to say, but now that the moment had come, now that he was gazing into her lovely eyes, it all seemed to have fled his mind. He ended up beginning rather badly.

"I'm going to die before you," he said flatly.

Nell gave a little snort of laughter and patted him reassuringly. "Och, Silvan, where do ye come up with yer—"

"Hush." He laid a gentle finger against her lips and kept it there.

Her eyes widened and she gazed at him inquiringly.

"The odds that I will die before you, Nellie, are significant. I would not have you grieve me. I ne'er offered my first wife the binding vows because she was not my mate, and I knew it. I ne'er offered them to you because you are my mate, and I knew it." He paused, searching for the right words. Her eyes were huge and round and she'd gone very still.

"That is without a doubt the most discombobulated bit of logic ye've e'er spouted, Silvan," she finally whispered against his finger.

"I couldn't bear the thought of leaving you alone, bound to me."

She took his finger from her lips and slipped her hand into his. "I could bear any number of years, Silvan, if I know we'll meet again."

"Do you mean that? Truly?"

"How could ye doubt it? Have I not shown ye my love?"

Och, in so many ways, he thought, exhilarated. And it was nigh time he show her his. Gently, Silvan placed his hand between her breasts, above her heart, and rested his other above his own. "Place your hands atop mine."

She glanced down at his hand and her eyes narrowed. "What happened to yer ring?"

" 'Tis no band of simple metal that holds us together, Nellie. 'Tis something far greater than that. As to what happened to my ring, I gave it to the queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan when she came and told me Dageus was alive and well, and free at last."

"What?" Nellie gasped.

"I'll tell you all anon." Silvan said impatiently. Now that he'd made up his mind to take the binding vows, he was desperate for her answer. He didn't want to waste another moment. He was frantic to claim her, lest something awful happen, like his heart give out before he could complete the vows. "Will you be saying the words after me, lass?"

"Och, life with ye is ne'er simple, is it?" she exclaimed. Then she smiled radiantly. "Aye, Silvan. I'll be saying the words."

Silvan's voice was firm and deep. "If aught must be lost..."

"So, how does one marry a Druid?" Chloe asked breathlessly. She couldn't stop touching him, couldn't believe that he was alive, that she had him back and everything had worked out.

With a finger beneath her chin, he tipped her face up for a soft kiss. "It's fairly simple, really. You nearly did it once," he said, flashing her a smile. A smile that fully reached his golden eyes, filling them with warmth. A smile that promised heated lovemaking the moment they completed his Druid rites. And she was definitely in need of some heated lovemaking. She felt as if she might burst from happiness.

His words penetrated a bit belatedly. She frowned, perplexed. "I did?"

"Aye." He placed one hand over her heart, the other over his own. "Place your hands atop mine, lass."

When she complied, he kissed her again, this time slow and sweet, holding her lower lip hostage for a long, delicious moment. Then he said, "Repeat after me, love."

She nodded, her eyes sparkling.

"If aught must be lost, 'twill be my honor for yours..."

"I am Given," Nellie said, blinking back tears. Emotion swelled inside her, crashing through her like an ocean wave, and she might have fallen to her knees had Silvan not caught her in his arms.

"Aye, lass, now you're truly mine," he said fiercely. "Forever."

"You *married* me that day in the heather?" Chloe shouted. "And you didn't tell me? *Ooh!* We are going to have to have a *serious* talk about how we

communicate!" She scowled up at him. "And while we're on that subject, we still haven't discussed you leaving that night without telling me!"

"After the loving, lass," Dageus purred, lowering his dark head to hers. "There will be plenty of time to speak of such things then."

And the loving, he vowed, as he slipped her sweater over her head, was going to take a very, very long time.

He was no longer dark; time was no longer his enemy. He'd claimed his mate, and the future loomed ahead of them, resplendent with promise.

The Immortal Highlander

Karen Marie Moning

Damn, *it's good to be me.*

· Adam Black, on being Adam Black

Tuatha Dé Danaan: (*tua day dhanna*)

A highly advanced race of immortal beings that settled in Ireland thousands of years before the birth of Christ. Called by many names: Children of the Goddess Danu; the True Race; the Gentry; the Daoine Sidhe; they are most commonly referred to as the Fae or Fairy. Although frequently portrayed as shimmering, dainty creatures of diminutive size that flit about exuding effervescent good humor and a penchant for mild mischief the true Tuatha Dé are neither so delicate nor so benevolent.

— from the O'Callaghan *Books of the Fae*

Adam Black:

Tuatha Dé Danaan. a rogue even among his own kind His favored glamour is that of an intensely sexual Highland blacksmith with a powerful rippling body, golden skin, long black hair, and dark, mesmerizing eyes Highly intelligent, lethally seductive. Alleged to have nearly broken The Compact on not one. but two occasions. He is, by far. the most dangerous and unpredictable of his race.

WARNING: EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION IF SIGHTED.

AVOID CONTACT AT ALL COST.

· from the O'Callaghan *Books of the Fae*

London, England

PROLOGUE

Adam Black stood in the central chamber of the stone catacombs beneath The Belthew Building and watched as Chloe Zanders stumbled about, searching for her Highland lover, Dageus MacKeltar.

She was weeping as if her very soul were being ripped apart. Incessant and piercing, it was enough to split a Tuatha Dé's head.

Or a human's, for that matter, he thought darkly.

He was getting bloody tired of her constant wailing. He had problems of his own. Big problems.

Aoibheal, queen of the Anatolia Dé Danaan, had finally made good on her long-running threats to punish him for his continued interference in the world of mortals. And she'd chosen the cruelest punishment of all.

She'd stripped him of his immortality and made him human.

He spared a quick glance down at himself and was relieved to find that, at least, she'd left him in his favored glamour: that of the dark-haired, muscular, irresistibly sexy blacksmith, a millennia-spanning blend of Continental Celt and Highland warrior, clad in tartan, armbands, and torque. On occasion she'd tinned him into things that didn't suffer the light of day

well.

His relief, however, was short-lived. So what if he looked like his usual self? He was human, for Christ's sake! Flesh and blood. Limited. Puny. Finite.

Cursing savagely, he eyed the sobbing woman. He could barely hear himself think. Perhaps if he informed her that Dageus wasn't really dead she would shut *up*. He had to find a way out of this intolerable situation, and fast.

"Your lover is not dead. Cease your weeping, woman," he ordered imperiously. He should know. Aoibheal had forced him to give of his own immortal life-essence to save the Highlander's life.

His command did not have the intended effect. On the contrary, just when he was certain she couldn't possibly get any louder—and how such a small creature managed to make such a huge noise was beyond him—his newly acquired eardrums were treated to a wail that escalated exponentially.

"Woman, cease!" he roared, clamping his hands to his ears. "I said *he is not dead*"

Still she wept. She didn't so much as glance in his direction, as if he'd not spoken at all. Furious, he skirted the nibble littering the chamber—debris from the battle that had taken place there a quarter hour past between Dageus MacKeltar and the Druid sect of the Draghar, the battle he should *never* have intervened in—and stalked to her side. He grabbed the nape of her neck to force her gaze to his. to compel her silence.

His hand slid right through the back of her skull and came out her nose.

She didn't even blink. Just hiccuped on a sob and wailed anew.

Adam stood motionless for a moment, then tried again, reaching for one of her breasts. His hand slid neatly through her heart and out her left shoulder blade.

He went still again, wings of unease unfurling in the pit of his all-too-human stomach.

By Danu, Aoibheal wouldn't. His dark eyes narrowed to slits.

Would she?

Jaw clenched, he tried again. And again his hand slipped through Chloe Zanders's body.

Christ, she had! The bitch!

Not only had the queen made him human, she had cursed him with the threefold power of the *féth fiada*!

Adam shook his head disbelievingly. The *féth fiada* was the enchantment his race used when they wanted to walk among humans undetected. A Tuatha Dé customarily invoked but one facet of the potent, triumvirate spell— invisibility. But it could also render its subject impossible for humans to hear and feel as well. The *féth fiada* was a useful tool if one wished to meddle unobserved.

But if cursed with it permanently? If unable to escape it?

That thought was too abhorrent to entertain.

He closed his eyes and delved into his mind to sift time/place and return to the Fae Isle of Morar. He didn't care who the queen was currently entertaining in her Royal Bower; she would undo this now.

Nothing happened. He remained precisely where he was.

He tried again.

There was no swift sensation of weightlessness, no sudden rush of that heady freedom and invincibility he always felt when traversing dimensions.

He opened his eyes. Still in the stone chamber

A snail curved his lips. Human, cursed, *and* powerless? Barred from the Fae realm? He tossed back his head, raking his long dark hair from his face. "All right. Aoibheal, you've made your point. Change me back now."

There was no response. Nothing but the sound of the woman's endless sobbing, echoing hollowly in the chill stone chamber

"Aoibheal, did you hear me? I said, 'I get it.' Now restore me."

Still no response. He knew she was listening, lingering a dimensional sliver just beyond the human realm. Watching, savoring his discomfort.

And... waiting for a show of submission, he acknowledged darkly.

A muscle leapt in his jaw. Humility was not, nor would ever be, his strong suit.

Still, if his choices were humble or *human*— and cursed and powerless, to boot— he'd eat humble pie until he choked on it.

"My Queen, you were right and I was wrong. See, I *can* say it."

Though the lie tasted foul upon his tongue. "And I vow never again to disobey you."

At least not until he was certain he was secure in her good graces again.

"Forgive me, Queen Most Fair." Of course she would. She always did.

"I am your most humble, adoring servant. O glorious Queen."

Was he laying it on too thick? he wondered idly, as the silence lengthened. He noticed he'd begun to tap a booted foot in a most human manner. He stomped it to make it be still. He was not human. He was nothing like them.

"Did you *hear* me? I apologized," he snapped.

After a few more moments, he sighed. Gutting his teeth, he dropped to his knees. It was universally known that Adam Black despised being on his knees for any reason, for anyone.

"Exalted leader of the True Race," he purred in the ancient, rarely used tongue of his kind, "Savior of the Danaan. I petition the grace and glory of thy throne." Ritual, ancient words of formal court manners, they signified as nothing else could, his complete and utter obeisance. And ritual demanded she reply.

The contrary bitch didn't.

He— who'd never before suffered the passage of time— now felt it acutely, as it stretched too long.

"Damn it, Aoibheal, fix me!" he thundered, lunging to his feet. "Give me back my powers! Make me immortal again!"

Nothing. Time spun out.

"A taste," he assured himself. "She's just giving me a taste of this, to teach me a lesson."

Any moment now she would appear. She would rebuke him. She would subject him to a scathing account of his many transgressions. He would nod, promise never to do it again, and all would be made right. Just like the thousands of other times he'd disobeyed or angered her.

An hour later nothing was right.

Two hours later and Chloe Zanders was gone, leaving him alone in the silent, dusty tombs. He almost missed her wailing. Almost.

Thirty-six hours later and his body was hungry, thirsty, and— a thing nearly incomprehensible to him— tired. The Tuatha Dé did not sleep. His mind, customarily razor-sharp and lightning fast, was getting muddled, sluggish, shutting down without his consent.

Unacceptable. He'd be damned if any part of him was doing a single thing without his consent. Not his mind. Not his body. It never had and never would. A Tuatha Dé was always in control. Always.

His last thought before unconsciousness claimed him was that he was bloody well certain he'd rather be *anything* else: stuck inside a mountain for a few hundred years, turned into a slimy, three-headed sea beast, forced to play the court fool again for a century or two.

Anything but... so... disgustingly... pathetically... uncontrollably... hum—

Cincinnati, Ohio

Several months later ...

1

Summer. Gabrielle O'Callaghan brooded— always her favorite season— had absolutely sucked this year.

Unlocking her car, she got in and slipped off her sunglasses. Shrugging out of her suit jacket, she nudged off her heels and took slow, deep breaths. She sat collecting herself for a few moments, then tugged free the clip restraining her hair and massaged her scalp.

She was getting the start of a killer headache. And her hands were *still* shaking. She'd nearly betrayed herself to the Fae.

She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid, but, God, there were just too many of them this summer! She hadn't spotted a fairy in Cincinnati for years, but now, for some bizarre reason, there were oodles of them.

Like Cincinnati was some kind of great place to hang out— could a city *be* more boring? Whatever their unfathomable reason for choosing the Tri-State, they'd appeared in droves in early June, and had been ruining her summer ever since.

And pretending she didn't see them never got any easier. With their perfect bodies, gold-velvet skin, and shimmering iridescent eyes, they were a little hard to miss. Drop-dead gorgeous, impossibly seductive, dripping pure power, the males were a walking temptation for a girl to—

Brusquely she shook her head to abort that treacherous thought. She'd survived this long and was darned if she was going to slip up and get caught by one of the erotic— *exotic*, she corrected herself impatiently— creatures.

But sometimes it was so hard not to look at them. And doubly difficult not to react. Especially when one caught her off guard like the last one had.

She'd been having lunch with Marian Temple, senior partner at the law firm of Temple, Turley and Tucker, at a posh downtown restaurant; a very critical lunch, during which she'd been interviewing for a postgraduate position.

A soon-to-be-third-year law student, Gabby was serving a summer internship with Little & Staller, a local firm of personal injury attorneys. It had taken her all of two days on the job to realize she was not cut out for representing pushy, med-bill-inflating plaintiffs who were firmly convinced their soft-tissue injuries were worth at least a million dollars per ache.

At the opposite end of the legal spectrum was Temple, Turley and Tucker. The most prestigious firm in the city, it catered to only the most desirable clients, specializing in business law and estate planning. What carefully selected criminal cases they chose to represent were renowned, precedent-setting ones. Ones that made a difference in the world, protecting fundamental rights and addressing intolerable injustices. And those were the cases she hungered to get her hands on. Even if she had to slave away for years, doing research and fetching coffee to get to them.

She'd been stressed all week, anticipating the interview, knowing that TT&T hired only the cream of the crop. Knowing she was competing against dozens of her classmates, not to

mention dozens more from law-schools around the country, in a cutthroat bid for a single opening. Knowing Marian Temple had a reputation for demanding nothing less than high-gloss sophistication and professional perfection.

But thanks to hours of aggressive practice interviews and pep talks from her best friend, Elizabeth, Gabby had been calm, composed, and in top form. The aloof Ms. Temple had been impressed with her scholastic achievements, and Gabby had gotten the distinct impression that the firm was predisposed to hire a woman (couldn't be too careful with those equal-opportunity statistics), which put her ahead of most of the competition. The lunch had gone swimmingly, until the moment they'd left the restaurant and stepped out onto Fifth Street.

As Ms. Temple was extending that all-important invitation to come in for a second, in-house interview with the partners (which was *never* arranged unless the firm was seriously considering making an offer, joy of joys!), a sexy, muscle-bound fairy male sauntered right between them in that infuriatingly arrogant I'm-so-perfect, don't-you-just-wish-you-were-me way they had, so close that its long golden hair brushed Gabby's cheek like a sensual ripple of silk.

The intoxicating fragrance of jasmine and sandalwood surrounded her, and the heat radiating off its powerful body caressed her like a sultry, erotic breeze. It took every ounce of her considerable self-discipline to *not* inch backward out of its way.

Or worse— yield to that incessant temptation and just pet the gorgeous tawny creature. How many times had she dreamed of doing that? Copping one tiny forbidden fairy-feel. Finally

finding out if all that golden fairy skin really felt as velvety as it looked.

You must never betray that you can see them, Gabby.

Thoroughly discombobulated by the fairy's proximity, her suddenly nerveless hand lost its grip on the iced coffee she'd taken from the restaurant in a to-go cup. It hit the sidewalk, the top flew off, and coffee exploded upward, drenching the impeccable Ms. Temple.

At that precise moment, the fairy turned back to look at her, its iridescent eyes narrowing.

Panicked. Gabby focused all her attention on the sputtering Ms. Temple. With the enthusiasm of near-hysteria, she plucked tissues from her purse and dabbed frantically at the spreading coffee stains on what had been, moments before, a pristine ivory suit that she had a sick feeling cost more than she made in a month.

Babbling loudly about how clumsy she was, apologizing and blaming everything from eating too much, to not being used to heels, to being nervous about the interview, in a matter of moments, she managed to completely blow the image of cool, composed confidence she'd so painstakingly projected through lunch.

But she'd had no choice.

In order to make the fairy believe she hadn't seen it, that she was just a clumsy human, nothing more, she'd had to act like a complete spaz and risk sabotaging her credibility with her prospective employer.

Sabotage it, she had.

Swatting away Gabby's frantically dabbing hands, Ms. Temple smoothed her ruined suit and huffed off toward her car, pausing to toss stiffly over her shoulder. "As I told you earlier, Ms. O'Callaghan, our firm works with only the highest-caliber clients. They can be demanding, excessive, and temperamental. And understandably so. When there are millions at stake, a client has every right to expect the best. We at Temple, Turley and Tucker pride ourselves on being unflappable under stress. Our clients require smooth, sophisticated handling. Frankly, Ms. O'Callaghan, you're too flighty to be successful with our firm. I'm sure you'll find an appropriate fit elsewhere. Good day, Ms. O'Callaghan. "

Feeling like she'd been kicked in the stomach, Gabby watched in stricken silence as Ms. Temple accepted her spotless Mercedes from the valet, dimly registering that the fairy, blessedly, was also moving on. As the sleek pearl-colored Mercedes merged onto Fifth Street and disappeared into traffic— the job of her dreams flapping farewell on its tailpipe— Gabby's shoulders slumped. With a gusty sigh, she turned and trudged down the street to the corner lot where simple law students not-destined-for-success-because-they-were-too-flighty could afford to park.

" 'Flighty,' my ass," she muttered, resting her head on the steering wheel. "You have no idea what my life is like. *You* can't see them."

All Ms. Temple had probably felt was a slight breeze, a moderate increase in temperature, perhaps caught a whiff of an exotic, arousing fragrance. And if, by chance, the fairy had brushed against her— although they were invisible, they were real, and were actually *there*— Ms. Temple would have rationalized it away somehow. Those who couldn't see the Fae always did.

Gabby had learned the hard way that people had zero tolerance for the inexplicable. It never ceased to amaze her what flimsy excuses they dredged up to protect their perception of reality. "Gee, I guess I didn't get enough sleep last night." Or, "Wow. I shouldn't have had that second (or third or fourth) beer with lunch." If all else failed, they settled for a simple "I must have imagined it."

How she longed for such oblivion!

She shook her head and tried to console herself with the thought that at least the fairy had been convinced and was gone. She was safe. For now.

The way Gabby figured it, the Fae were responsible for ninety-nine percent of the problems in her life. She'd take responsibility for the other one percent, but *they* were the reason her life this summer had been one crisis after another. *They* were the reason she'd begun to dread leaving her house, never knowing where one might pop up, or how badly it might startle her. Or what kind of ass she'd make of herself, trying to regroup. *They* were the reason her boyfriend had broken up with her fifteen days, three hours, and— she glanced broodingly at her watch— forty-two minutes ago.

Gabrielle O'Callaghan harbored a special and very personal hatred for the Fae.

"I don't see you. I don't see you." she muttered beneath her breath as two mouthwatering fairy males strolled past the hood of her car. She averted her gaze, caught herself, then angled the rearview mirror and pretended to be fussing with her lipstick.

Never look away too sharply, her grandmother, Moira O'Callaghan, had always cautioned. *You must act natural. You*

must learn to let your gaze slide over them without either hitching or pulling away too abruptly, or they'll know you know. And they'll take you. You must never betray that you can see them. Promise me, Gabby I can't lose you!

Gram had seen them, too, these creatures other people couldn't see. Most of the women on her mom's side did, though sometimes the "gift" skipped generations. As it had with her mom, who'd moved to Los Angeles years ago (like the people in California were less weird than fairies), leaving then-seven-year-old Gabrielle behind with Grain "until she got settled." Jilly O'Callaghan had never gotten settled.

Why couldn't it have skipped me? Gabby brooded. A normal life was all she'd ever-wanted.

And proving damned difficult to have, even in boring Cincinnati. Gabby was beginning to think that living in the Tri-State— the geographical convergence of Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky— was a bit like living at the mystical convergence of Sunnydale's Hellmouth.

Except the Midwest didn't get demons and vampires— oh, no— they got fairies: dangerously seductive, inhuman, arrogant creatures that would take her and do God-only-knew-what to her if they ever figured out that she could see them.

Her family history was riddled with tales of ancestors who'd been captured by the dreaded Fae Hunters and never seen again. Some of the tales claimed they were swiftly and brutally killed by the savage Hunters, others that they were forced into slavery to the Fae.

She had no idea what actually became of those foolish enough to be taken, but she knew one thing for certain: She had no

intention of ever finding out.

* * *

Later Gabby would realize that it was all the cup of coffee's fault. Every awful thing that happened to her from that moment on could be traced directly back to that cup of coffee with the stunning simplicity of an airtight conditional argument: If not for *A* (said cup of coffee), then not *B* (blowing job interview), hence not *C* (having to go into work that night), and certainly not *D* (the horrible thing that happened to her there)... on to infinity.

It really wasn't fair that such a trivial, spur-of-the-moment, seemingly harmless decision such as taking an iced coffee to-go could change the entire course of a girl's life.

Not that she didn't hold the fairy significantly culpable, but studying law had taught her to isolate the critical catalyst so one could argue culpability, and the simple facts were that if she hadn't had the cup of coffee in her hand, she wouldn't have dropped it, wouldn't have splattered Ms. Temple, wouldn't have made an ass of herself, and wouldn't have lost all hope of landing her dream job.

If not for the cup of coffee, the fairy would have had no reason to turn and look back at her, and she would have had no reason to panic. Life would have rolled smoothly on. With the promise

of that coveted second interview, she would have gone out celebrating with her girlfriends that night.

But because of that nefarious cup of coffee, she didn't go out. She went home, took a long bubble bath, had a longer cry, then later that evening, when she was certain the office would be empty and she wouldn't have to field humiliating questions from her fellow interns, she drove back downtown to catch up on work. She was behind by a whopping nineteen arbitration cases, which, now that she didn't have a different job lined up, mattered.

And because of that calamitous cup of coffee, she was in a bad mood and not paying attention as she parallel-parked in front of her office building, and she didn't notice the dark, dangerous-looking fairy stepping from the shadows of the adjacent alley.

If not for the stupid cup of coffee, she wouldn't have even *been* there.

And that was when things took a diabolical turn from bad to worse.

2

Adam Black raked a hand through his long black hair and scowled as he stalked down the alley.

Three eternal months he'd been human. Ninety-seven horrific days, to be exact. Two thousand three hundred twenty-eight interminable hours. One hundred thirty-nine thousand six hundred eighty thoroughly offensive minutes.

He'd become obsessed with increments of time. It was an embarrassingly mortal affliction. Next thing he knew, he'd be wearing a watch.

Never.

He'd been certain Aoibheal would have come for him by now. Would have staked his very essence on it; not that he had much left to stake.

But she hadn't, and he was sick of waiting. Not only were humans allotted a ridiculously finite slice of time to exist, their bodies had requirements that consumed a great deal of that time. Sleep alone consumed a full quarter of it. Although he'd mastered those requirements over the past few months, he resented being slave to his physical form. Having to eat, wash, dress, sleep, piss, shave, brush his hair and teeth, for Christ's sake! He wanted to be himself again. Not at the queen's bloody convenience, but *now*.

Hence he'd left London and journeyed to Cincinnati (the infernally long way— by plane) looking for the half-Fae son he'd sired over a millennium ago, Circenn Brodie, who'd married a twenty-first-century mortal and usually resided here with her.

Usually.

Upon arriving in Cincinnati, he'd found Circenn's residence vacant, and had no idea where to look for him next. He'd taken up residence there himself, and had been killing time since— endeavoring grimly to ignore that, for the first time in his timeless existence, time was returning the favor— waiting for Circenn to return. A half-blooded Tuatha Dé, Circenn had magic Adam no longer possessed.

Adam's scowl deepened. What paltry power the queen had left him was virtually worthless. He'd quickly discovered that she'd thought through his punishment most thoroughly. The spell of the *féth fiada* was one of the most powerful and perception-altering that the Tuatha Dé possessed, employed to permit a Tuatha Dé full interaction with the human realm, while keeping him or her undetectable by humans. It cloaked its wearer in illusion that affected short-term memory and generated confusion in the minds of those in the immediate vicinity.

If Adam toppled a newsstand, the vendor would blithely blame an unseen wind. If he took food from a diner's plate, the person merely decided he/she must have finished. If he procured new clothing for himself at a shop, the owner would register an inventory error. If he snatched groceries from a passerby and flung the bag to the ground, his hapless victim would turn on the nearest bystander and a bitter fight would ensue (he'd done that a few times for a bit of sport). If he plucked the purse from a woman's arm and dangled it before her face, she would simply

walk through both him and it (the moment he touched a thing, it, too, was sucked into the illusion cast by the *féth fiada* until he released it), then head in the opposite direction, muttering about having forgotten her purse at home.

There was nothing he could do to draw attention to himself. And he'd tried everything. To all intents and purposes. Adam Black didn't exist. Didn't even merit his own measly slice of human space.

He knew why she'd chosen this particular punishment: Because he'd sided with humans in their little disagreement, she was forcing him to taste of being human in the worst possible way. Alone and powerless, without a single distraction with which to pass the time and entertain himself.

He'd had enough of a taste to last an eternity.

Once an all-powerful being that could sift time and space, a being that could travel anywhere and anywhen in the blink of an eye, he was now limited to a single useful power: He could sift place over short distances, but no more than a few miles. It'd surprised him the queen had left him even that much power, until the first time he'd almost been run down by a careening bus in the heart of London.

She'd left him just enough magic to stay alive. Which told him two things: one, she planned to forgive him eventually, and two, it was probably going to be a long, long time. Like, probably not until the moment his mortal form was about to expire.

Fifty more years of this would drive him bloody frigging nuts.

Problem was, even when Circenn *did* return, Adam still hadn't figured out a way to communicate with him. Because of his

mortal half, Circenn wouldn't be able to see past the *féth fiada* either.

All he needed, Adam brooded for the thousandth time, was one person. Just one person who could see him. A single person who could help him. He wasn't entirely without options, but he couldn't exercise a damned one of them without someone to aid him.

And that sucked too. The almighty Adam Black needed help. He could almost hear silvery laughter tinkling on the night breeze, blowing tauntingly across the realms, all the way from the shimmering silica sands of the Isle of Morar.

With a growl of caged fury, he stalked out of the alley.

* * *

Gabby indulged herself in a huge self-pitying sigh as she got out of her car. Normally on nights like this, when the sky was black velvet, glittering with stars and a silver-scythe moon, warm and humid and alive with the glorious scents and sounds of summer, nothing could depress her.

But not tonight. Everyone but her was out somewhere having a life, while she was scrambling to clean up after the latest fairy debacle. Again.

It seemed like all she ever did anymore.

She wondered briefly, before she managed to push the depressing thought away, what her ex was doing tonight. Was he out at the bars? Had he already met someone new? Someone who wasn't still a virgin at twenty-four?

And *that* was the Fae's fault too.

She slammed the car door harder than she should have, and a little piece of chrome trim fell off and clattered to the pavement. It was the third bit of itself her aging Corolla had shed that week, though she was pretty sure the antenna had been assisted by bored neighborhood kids. With a snort of exasperation, she locked the car, kicked the little piece of trim beneath the car—she refused to clean up one more thing— and turned toward the building.

And froze.

A fairy male had just stalked out of the alley and was standing by the bench in the small courtyard oasis near the entrance to her office building. As she watched, it stretched out on the bench on its back, folded its arms behind its head, and stared up at the night sky, looking as if it had no intention of moving for a long, long time.

Damn and double-damn!

She was still in such a stew over the day's events that she wasn't sure she could manage to walk by it without giving in to the overwhelming urge to *kick* it.

It.

Fairies were "its," never "hims" or "hers." Gram had taught her at a young age not to personify them. They weren't human. And it was dangerous to think of them, even in the privacy of her

thoughts, as if they were.

But heavens, Gabby thought, staring, he— *it*— was certainly male.

So tall that the bench wasn't long enough for it to fully stretch out on, it had propped one leg on the back of the bench and bent the other at the knee, its legs spread in a basely masculine position. It was clad in snugfitting, faded jeans, a black T-shirt, and black leather boots. Long, silky black hair spilled over its folded arms, falling to sweep the sidewalk. In contrast to the golden, angelic ones she'd seen earlier that day, this one was dark and utterly devilish-looking.

Gold armbands adorned its muscular arms, showcasing its powerful, rock-hard biceps, and a gold torque encircled its neck, gleaming richly in the amber glow of the gaslights illuming the courtyard oasis.

Royalty, she realized, with a trace of breathless fascination. Only those of a royal house were entitled to wear torques of gold. She'd never seen a member of one of the Ruling Houses before.

And "royal" was certainly a good word for him, er... it. Its profile was sheer majesty. Chiseled features, high cheekbones, strong jaw, aquiline nose, all covered with that luscious gold-velvet fairy skin. She narrowed her eyes, absorbing details. Unshaven jaw-sculpted by five-o'clock shadow. Full mouth. Lower lip decadently full. Sinfully so, really. (*Gabby, quit thinking that!*)

She inhaled slowly, exhaled softly, holding utterly still, one hand on the roof of her car, the other clutching her keys.

It exuded immense sexuality: base, raw, scorching. From this

distance she should not have been able to feel the heat from its body, but she could. She should not have gotten a bit dizzy from its exotic scent, but she had. As if it were twenty times more potent than any she'd encountered before; a veritable powerhouse of a fairy.

She was never going to be able to walk past it. Just wasn't happening. Not today. There was only so much she was capable of in a given day, and Gabby O'Callaghan had exceeded her limits.

Still... it hadn't moved. In fact, it seemed utterly oblivious to its surroundings. It couldn't hurt to look a little longer...

Besides, she reminded herself, she had a duty to surreptitiously observe as much as possible about any unknown fairy specimen. In such fashion did the O'Callaghan women protect themselves and the future of their children— by learning about their enemy. By passing down stories. By adding new information, with sketches when possible, to the multivolume *Books of the Fae*, thereby providing future generations greater odds of escaping detection.

This one didn't have the sleekly muscled body of most fairy males, she noted; this one had the body of a warrior. Shoulders much too wide to squeeze onto the bench. Arms bunched with muscle, thick forearms, strong wrists. Cut abdomen rippling beneath the fabric of its T-shirt each time it shifted position. Powerful thighs caressed by soft, faded denim.

No, not a warrior, she mused, that wasn't quite it. A shadowy image was dancing in the dark recesses of her mind and she struggled to bring it into focus.

More like... ah. she had it! Like one of those blacksmiths of yore

who'd spent their days pounding steel at a scorching forge, metal clanging, sparks flying. Possessing massive brawn, yet also capable of the delicacy necessary to craft intricately embellished blades, combining pure power with exquisite control.

There wasn't a spare ounce of flesh on it, just rock-hard male body. It had a finely honed, brutal strength that, coupled with its height and breadth, could feel overwhelming to a woman. Especially if it were stretching all that rippling muscle on top of —

Stop that, O'Callaghan! Wiping tiny beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, she drew a shaky breath, struggling desperately for objectivity. She felt as hot as the forge she could imagine him bending over, hard body glistening, pounding... pounding...

Go, Gabby, a faint inner voice warned. *Go now. Hurry.*

But her inner alarm went off too late. At that precise moment it turned its head and glanced her way.

She should have looked away. She tried to look away. She couldn't.

Its face, full-on, was a work of impossible masculine beauty—exquisite symmetry brushed by a touch of savagery— but it was the eyes that got her all tangled up. They were ancient eyes, immortal eyes, eyes that had seen more than she could ever dream of seeing in a thousand lifetimes. Eyes full of intelligence, mockery, mischief, and— her breath caught in her throat as its gaze dropped down her body, then raked slowly back up— unchained sexuality. Black as midnight beneath slashing brows, its eyes flashed with gold sparks.

Her mouth dropped open and she gasped.

But, but, but, a part of her sputtered in protest, it doesn't have fairy eyes! It can't be a fairy! They have iridescent eyes. Always. And if it's not a fairy, what is it?

Again its gaze slid down her body, this time much more slowly, lingering on her breasts, fixing unabashedly at the juncture of her thighs. Without a slued of self-consciousness, it shifted its hips to gain play in its jeans, reached down, and blatantly adjusted itself.

Helplessly, as if mesmerized, her gaze followed, snagging on that big, dark hand tugging at the faded denim. At the huge, swollen bulge cupped by the soft, worn fabric. For a moment it closed its hand over itself and rubbed the thick ridge, and she was horrified to feel her own hand clenching. She flushed, mouth dry. cheeks flaming.

Suddenly it went motionless and its preternatural gaze locked with hers, eyes narrowing

"Christ," it hissed, surging up from the bench in one graceful ripple of animal strength, "you see me. *You're seeing me!*"

"No I'm not," Gabby snapped instantly. Defensively. Stupidly. *Oh, that was good, O'Callaghan, you dolt!*

Snapping her mouth shut so hard her teeth clacked, she unlocked the car door and scrambled in faster than she'd ever thought possible.

Twisting the key in the ignition, she threw the car into reverse.

And then she did another stupid thing: She glanced at it again. She couldn't help it. It simply commanded attention.

It was stalking toward her, its expression one of pure astonishment.

For a brief moment she gaped blankly back. Was a fairy *capable* of being astonished? According to O'Callaghan sources, they experienced no emotion. And how could they? They had no hearts, no souls. Only a fool would think some kind of higher conscience lurked behind those quixotic eyes. Gabby was no fool.

It was almost to the curb. Heading straight for her.

With a startled jerk she came to her senses, slammed the car into drive, and jammed the gas pedal to the floor.

* * *

Darroc, Elder of the Tuatha Dé Danaan's High Council, stood atop the Hill of Tara on the Plain of Meath. A cool night breeze tangled long copper hair shot with gold around a face that was erotically beautiful but for the scar marring his chiseled visage. It was a scar he might easily have concealed with glamour, but chose not to. He wore it to remember, he wore it so certain others would not forget.

Ireland once ours, he thought bitterly, staring out at the lush, verdant land.

And Tara— long ago called *Teamir* and before that christened

Cathair Crofhind by the Tuatha Dé themselves— once testament to the might and glory of his race, was now a tourist stop overrun by humans accompanied by guides who told stories of his people that were abjectly laughable.

The Tuatha Dé had arrived on this world long before human myths purported they had. But what could one expect from puny little creatures whose lives both began and sputtered to an end in the merest blink of a Tuatha Dé's eye?

When first we found this world, we had so much hope. Indeed, the name they'd chosen for Tara— *Cathair Crofhind*— meant " 'twas not amiss"; their choice of this world to be their new home.

But it had been amiss, egregiously amiss. Man and Tuatha Dé had proved incompatible, incapable of sharing this fertile world that bore so many similarities to their own, and his race, once majestic and proud, now hid in places humans had not yet discovered. Having only recently learned to harness the power of the atom, humans would not present a serious threat to the Tuatha Dé for some time.

Yet time passed swiftly for his kind, and then would his people be forced to flee again?

Darroc refused to live to see such a day.

Banished. The noble Tuatha Dé had been relegated to leftover places, just as they'd been forced out once before, an aeon ago. Outcast then. Cast out now. The only difference was that humans were not yet powerful enough to drive them offworld as they'd been driven from their beloved home.

Yet.

They hadn't been able to take Danu— the other races had been too powerful— but they could take this world and conquer it. Now. Before Man advanced any further.

"Darroc," a voice interrupted his bitter musings. Mael, the queen's consort, appeared beside him. "I tried to slip away from court sooner but— "

"I know how closely she watches you and expected it would be some time." Darroc cut him off, impatient for news. A few days in Faery was months in the human realm where Darroc had been waiting at their appointed meeting place. "Tell me. Did she do it?"

Tall, powerfully developed, with tawny skin and a mane of shimmering bronze, the queen's latest favorite nodded, his iridescent eyes gleaming. "She did. Adam is human. And, Darroc, she stripped his powers. He can no longer even *see* us."

Darroc smiled. Perfect. He could ask for no more. His nemesis, that eternal thorn in his side, mankind's most persistent advocate, was banished from Faery, and without him. the balance of power at court was skewed in Darroc's favor at long last.

And Adam was helpless, a walking target. Mortal.

"Know you where he is now?" asked Darroc.

Mael shook his head. "Only that he walks the human realm. Shall I go hunting for you?"

"No. You've done enough. Mael," Darroc told him. He had other Hunters in mind to track his quarry. Hunters not quite as loyal to the queen as she liked to believe. "You must return before she discovers you gone. She must suspect nothing."

As the queen's consort disappeared. Darroc also sifted time and place, but to a different realm entirely.

He laughed as he went, knowing that although Adam was wont to champion mortals, the vainglorious prince of the *D'Jai* would hate being human, would despise being trapped in the body of one of those limited little, fragile creatures whose average life span was so horrifically brief.

He was about to find it far briefer than average.

3

Adam was so caught off guard that it didn't occur to him to do a series of short jumps and follow the woman, until it was too late.

By the time he'd tensed to sift, the dilapidated vehicle had sped off, and he had no idea where it had gone. He popped about in various directions for a time, but was unable to pick it up again.

Shaking his head, he returned to the bench and sat down, cursing himself in half a dozen languages.

Finally, someone had *seen* him.

And what had he done? Let her get away. Undermined by his disgusting human anatomy.

It had just been made excruciatingly clear to him that the human male brain and the human male cock couldn't both sustain sufficient amounts of blood to function at the same time. It was one or the other, and the human male apparently didn't get to choose which one.

As a Tuatha Dé, he would have been in complete control of his lust. Desirous yet coolheaded, perhaps even a touch bored (it wasn't as if he could do something he hadn't done before; given a few thousand years, a Tuatha Dé got around to trying everything).

But as a human male, lust was far more intense, and his body was apparently slave to it. A simple hard-on could turn him into a bloody Neanderthal.

How *had* mankind survived this long? For that matter, how had they ever managed to crawl out of their primordial swamps to begin with?

Blowing out an exasperated breath, he rose from the bench and began pacing a stunted space of cobbled courtyard

There he'd been, lying on his back, staring up at the stars, wondering where in the hell Circenn might have hid himself off to for so long, when suddenly he'd suffered a prickly sensation, as if he were the focus of an intense gaze.

He'd glanced over, half-expecting to see a few of his brethren laughing at him. In fact, he'd hoped to see his brethren. Laughing or not. In the past ninety-seven days he'd searched high and low for one of his race, but hadn't caught so much as a glimpse of a Tuatha Dé. He'd finally concluded that the queen must have forbidden them to spy upon him, for he could find no other explanation for their absence. He knew full well there were those of his race that would savor the sight of his suffering.

He'd seen— not his brethren— but a woman. A human woman, illumed by that which his kind didn't possess, lit from within by the soft golden glow of her immortal soul.

A young, lushly sensual woman at that, with the look of the Irish about her. Long silvery-blond hair twisted up in a clip, loose, shorter strands spiking about a delicate heart-shaped face. Huge eyes uptilted at the outer corners, a pointed chin, a full, lush mouth. A flash of fire in her catlike great-gold gaze, proof of that passionate Gaelic temper that always turned him

on. Full round breasts, shapely legs, luscious ass.

He'd gone instantly, painfully, hard as a rock.

And for a few critical moments, his brain hadn't functioned at all. All the rest of him had. Stupendously well, in fact. Just not his brain.

Cursed by the *féth fiada*, he'd been celibate for three long, hellish months now. And his own hand didn't count.

Lying there, imagining all the things he would do to her if only he could, he'd completely failed to process that she was not only standing there looking in his general direction, but his first instinct had been right: He was the focus of an intense gaze. She was looking directly at him.

Seeing him.

By the time he'd managed to find his feet, to even remember that he had feet, she'd been in her car.

She'd escaped him.

But not for long, he thought, eyes narrowing. He would find her.

She'd seen him. He had no idea how or why she'd been able to, but frankly he didn't much care. She had, and now she was going to be his ticket back to Paradise.

And, he thought, lips curving in a wicked, erotic grin, he was willing to bet she'd be able to *feel* him too. Logic dictated that if she was immune to one aspect of the *féth fiada*, she would be immune to them all.

For the first time since the queen had made him human, he threw back his head and laughed. The rich, dark sound rolled—

despite the human mouth shaping it— not entirely human, echoing in the empty street.

He turned and eyed the building behind him speculatively. He knew a great deal about humans from having walked among them for so many millennia, and he'd learned even more about them in the past few months. They were creatures of habit; like plodding little Highland sheep, they dutifully trod the same hoof-beaten paths, returning to the same pastures day after day.

Undoubtedly, there was a reason she'd come to this building this evening.

And undoubtedly, there was something in that building that would lead him to her.

The luscious little Irish was going to be his savior.

She would help him find Circenn and communicate his plight. Circenn would sift dimensions and return him to the Fae Isle of Morar where the queen held her court. And Adam would persuade her that enough was enough already.

He knew Aoibheal wouldn't be able to look him in the eyes and deny him. He merely had to get to her, see her, touch her, remind her how much she favored him and why.

Ah, yes, now that he'd found someone who could see him, he'd be his glorious immortal self again in no time at all.

In the meantime, pending Circenn's return, he now had much with which to entertain himself. He was no longer in quite the same rush to be made immortal again. Not just yet. Not now that he suddenly had the opportunity to experience sex in human form. Fae glamour wasn't nearly as sensitive as the body he currently inhabited, and— sensual to the core— he'd been

doubly pissed off at Aoibheal for making him unable to explore its erotic capabilities. She could be such a bitch sometimes.

If a simple hard-on in human form could reduce him to a primitive state, what would burying himself inside a woman do? What would it feel like to come inside her?

There was no doubt in his mind that he would soon find out.

Never had the mortal woman lived and breathed who could say no to a bit of fairy tail.

* * *

Gabby didn't take her foot from the accelerator until she'd squealed into the shadowy alley behind her house at 735 Monroe Street. Then she slammed on the brakes so hard she nearly gave herself whiplash.

She'd run every red light between Cincinnati and Newport, half-hoping a cop would pull her over (despite the warrant out for her arrest for unpaid parking tickets, as *if* she could afford to pay them once they'd doubled, with amnesty-day still four months away, and really, if the city would put sufficient parking downtown, a person wouldn't be forced to *invent* parking spaces). Throw her in jail. Lock her away where maybe the thing wouldn't be able to find her.

Most days she loved living in Kentucky, in her quaint historic

neighborhood of old Victorians and Italianates, wrought-iron fences, climbing bougainvillaea and magnolia trees, a mere mile across the river from Ohio. It was convenient to work, to school, to the bars, to everything that mattered. But tonight it was much too close for comfort. Then again, Siberia would have felt too close for comfort at the moment.

Parking as close to her house as possible, she snatched up her purse, leapt from the car, raced up the steps, unlocked the back door with shaking hands, slammed it shut behind her, locked it, slid the dead bolt, then collapsed in a limp little heap on the floor.

She stated unseeingly around the dark kitchen, ears straining, listening intently for any hint that it had somehow managed to follow her. How she wished she had a garage! Her car was just sitting out there like a big dilapidated powder-blue X: *Here hides Gabby O'Callaghan. A sitting duck. Quack, quack.*

"Oh, God, what have I done?" she whispered, horrified.

Twenty-four years of hiding, of maintaining a flawless façade, undone in a single night.

Gram would be so disappointed.

She was so disappointed. She'd stood there gaping— no, ogling the thing. And she'd justified it by feeding herself the flimsy fib that she was only staring so she could accurately identify it in the O'Callaghan *Books of the Fae*, or describe it if it wasn't already in there.

As if.

Do you find them attractive? Moira O'Callaghan had asked a fourteen-year-old Gabrielle over orange-ginger tea in the

kitchen late one night, nearly ten years ago.

Gabby had blushed furiously, not wanting to betray the depth of her hopeless infatuation. While her high school friends dreamed of actors and rock stars and seniors with cars, she dreamed of a fairy prince that would come swooping into her life and carry her off to some exotic, beautiful land. One that would somehow transcend the innate coldbloodedness of its kind, all for love of *her*.

Do you? Gram pressed sternly. Ashamed, Gabby had nodded.

That's what makes them so dangerous, Gabrielle. The Fae are no better than the Hunters they send after us. They are inhumanly seductive. "Inhuman" is the word you must remember. No souls. No hearts. Do not romanticize them.

She'd been guilty of it then. She'd not thought herself guilty of it still. With the passing of her teen years, she thought she'd laid many things to rest, including her foolish infatuation with a fantasy fairy prince.

Not.

With a groan of abject misery, she forced herself up from the floor. Cowering in a limp little heap wasn't going to accomplish anything.

If you ever betray yourself, Grain had told her too many times to count, if one of them ever realizes you can see them, you must leave immediately. Don't dare waste time packing, just get in the car and go as fast and as far as you can. I'm leaving you money in a special account to be used only for that purpose. It should be more than enough to see you to safety.

Gabby clutched the edge of the kitchen counter and closed her

eyes.

She didn't want to leave, damn it. This was her home, the home Grain had raised her in. Every corner was filled with precious memories. Every inch of the century-old, rambling Victorian was dear to her, from the slate roof that was always springing a new-leak, to the spacious, high-ceilinged rooms, to the archaic hot-water heating system that knocked and rattled, but steamed so cozily in the winter. And so what if she couldn't afford to heat most of the house and had to wear layers of clothing unless she was within a few feet of a radiator? So what if it still didn't have central air and the summers were swelteringly hot?

On occasion she'd been awfully tempted to dip into her escape-the-fairy fund, but she'd resisted. Things would change once she graduated and got a real job. Her finances wouldn't always be so precarious. Even an entry-level position with a law firm would enable her to start paying off her pile of student loans and begin much-needed renovations.

She spent most of her time in the octagonal turret anyway, either in the library on the first floor or in the upstairs bedroom she'd redesigned for herself when Gram had died. With all the windows open on a summer night and the ceiling fan softly winning, she could bear the heat. Besides, she loved lying in bed looking out over the sprawling lush gardens (despite the rickety wrought-iron fencing that desperately needed to be replaced). The mortgage had been paid off years ago. She'd planned never to leave, had hoped to one day fill up the too-silent rooms with children of her own.

And now, just because one dratted fairy—

Wait a minute, she thought, her eyes flying open, *it didn't have fairy eyes, remember?* In her panic, she'd completely forgotten

about its strange eyes. They'd been a single color. Black as midnight. Black as sin but for those golden sparks.

Definitely not fairy. The Fae had iridescent eyes that changed quicksilver-fast, spanning all the colors of the rainbow. Shimmery and quixotic. Neva black-and-gold.

In fact, she thought, nibbling her lower lip pensively, it had displayed several baffling anomalies: its eyes; its human attire—really, a fairy in jeans and a T-shirt?—usually the Fae wore garments fashioned of fabrics unlike anything she'd ever seen; and its seeming emotion.

Could she be so lucky? Frowning, she replayed the entire encounter in her mind, trying to isolate any other anomalies. Was it possible that the creature she'd seen wasn't a fairy but something else?

Heartened by the possibility, she turned and hurried through the dark house toward the turret library. She needed to consult the O'Callaghan Books.

Comprised of nineteen thick, tediously detailed volumes that dated back to the fifth century, the *Books* were dense with fairy lore, sightings, overheard conversations, and speculation. Faithfully preserved by her ancestors, added to over the centuries, the tomes were stuffed to overflowing with fairy fact and legend.

In there somewhere would be information about the creature she'd seen tonight.

Perhaps, she clung determinedly to the optimistic thought as she hastened down the hallway, the thing didn't even signify in the fairy scheme of things. Perhaps it had no greater desire to

bother her than she had to bother it.

Perhaps she was worrying for no reason at all.

* * *

And perhaps, she thought dejectedly many hours later, dropping a dusty volume in her lap as if burned, *the moon was made of cheese*.

It *was* a fairy.

And not just any fairy.

It was the worst fairy of all.

And desire? It had it in spades. To bother her? Oh, she'd be lucky if that was all it did. Torture her, play with her for its own amusement, drop her in the midst of some medieval Highland battle and watch her get trampled by snorting warhorses: Those were all possibilities, according to what she'd just read. If it stayed true to form— the thought made her shiver— it would seduce her first. Try to, she amended hastily. (The fact that, according to what she'd read, no mortal woman could resist it was a thought she refused to ponder overlong. That arrogant, vainglorious fairy was *not* getting a piece of Gabby O'Callaghan.)

Rubbing her eyes, she shook her head. *Leave it to me*, she

brooded, *to never do anything by halves*. It wasn't enough to merely betray herself to the Fae, she had to go and do it to the most notorious one of all.

A silver-tongued seducer, it was said to be so devilishly charming that mortals didn't even realize they were in danger until it was much too late. It went by Puck, Robin Goodfellow, and Wayland Smith, among countless other names.

A rogue even among his own kind...

When she'd begun searching, she'd been afraid it might take her days to wade through the rambling tomes and discern the identity of the creature she'd seen, assuming it was even in there. The earliest volumes were written in Gaelic, which—despite Gram's valiant efforts to teach her the old tongue—Gabby still couldn't speak, and could scarcely muddle her way through reading.

The *Books of the Fae* were a nightmare to sort through, written in myriad and often illegible scripts, with notes crammed into the margins of every page, cross-referencing other notes crammed into other margins on equally difficult-to-decipher pages.

More than once Gabby had complained to her grandmother that someone "really needed to set up an index and organize these damn things." And more than once Gram had smiled, given her a pointed look, and said. "Yes, someone should. What's stopping you?"

Though Gabby would have done nearly anything her beloved grandmother had asked of her, she'd determinedly avoided *that* task.

She'd buried herself instead in modern-day law books that were far less disturbing than ancient tomes that brought to life an exotic world, which her continued existence and hope for a normal future depended upon her ability to ignore.

After hours of fruitless searching, Gabby had finally noticed another book, one she couldn't recall having seen before, a slimmer volume tucked back in a corner, as if it had inadvertently gotten pushed behind the other books and forgotten. Curious, she'd reached for it, brushing thick dust from the cover.

Highly intelligent, lethally seductive...

Bound in soft black leather, the tome she'd nearly overlooked contained the information she sought. Her ancestors had taken the subject matter so seriously that they'd devoted a separate volume to it.

Unlike the other volumes, which were written in disjointed, sporadic journal fashion and dealt with whatever fairy had recently been sighted, the slim black book addressed only one, and flowed in chronological order, complemented by numerous sketches. Also, unlike the other volumes that were simply labeled by Roman numerals, this one merited its own title: *The Book of the Sin Siriche Du*.

Or, loosely translated from Gaelic— she was capable of that much— the book of the darkest/blackest elf/fairy.

She'd found the creature she'd seen tonight: Adam Black.

The earliest accounts of it were sketchy, descriptions of its various glammers, warnings about its devilry, cautions about its insatiable sexuality and penchant for mortal women ("*so sates a*

lass, that she is oft incapable of speech, her wits muddled for a fortnight or more." Oh, please. Gabby thought, was that the medieval equivalent of screwing her brains out?), but by the approach of the first millennium, the accounts became more detailed.

In the mid-ninth century— near 850 AD.— the thing had gone on a rampage, meddling with mortals for the seemingly sole purpose of inciting fury and causing battles to break out all over Scotland.

Thousands had died by the time it was done amusing itself.

Numerous sightings had been made of the thing watching, smiling, as blood ran on countless battlefields. For a time it hadn't been just O'Callaghan women who'd seen it; it had made no effort whatsoever to hide itself, and her ancestors had gathered the tales of those myriad sightings, recording them in great detail.

By far the most dangerous and unpredictable of his race...

No other fairy had ever dared such blatant, cold-blooded interference with humankind.

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour, jailing her. She rubbed her eyes, startled to realize that the night had sped by and it was already morning. The first rays of sunlight were pressing at the edges of the drapes that, late last night, she'd pulled tightly across the windows. She'd been up for well over twenty-four hours straight; it was no wonder her eyes felt so gritty and tired.

His favored glamour is that of an intensely sexual Highland blacksmith....

Her gaze drifted back to the book in her lap, opened to a sketch of the dark fairy.

Uncanny. It was the very image that had occurred to her when she'd first spotted it. Was it possible, she wondered, that there really was such a thing as genetic memory?

Knowledge passed from one generation to the next, imprinted in one's very DNA? It would go a long way toward explaining why the moment she'd laid eyes on it all kinds of alarms had gone off inside her. Why she'd thought instinctively of a blacksmith, as if in the deepest, darkest reaches of her soul she'd instantly recognized her primordial enemy. Enemy to countless O'Callaghan women before her.

The sketch didn't begin to do it justice, though it captured the unmistakable essence of it. Sighted in medieval times and sketched at a place in the Highlands called Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea (where it had allegedly killed a young Gypsy woman), it was all muscle and arrogant sexuality, clad in a kilt, standing at a forge near a copse of Rowan trees, before a magnificent, medieval castle that loomed in the background. Strong hand wielding a smith's hammer, its arm was flexed in midswing. Its hair was flying about its face in a dark tangle that fell to its waist. Its lips were curved in a mocking smile.

She'd seen that smile tonight. And a worse one still. One far more... predatory. If possible.

Her gaze fixed on the heavily inked and underscored admonition beneath the sketch:

AVOID CONTACT AT ALL COST

"Oh, Gram," she whispered, a sudden, hot burn of tears stinging

her eyes, "you were right"

She had to leave. *Now*.

* * *

Twenty-two frenetic minutes later, Gabby had changed into jeans and a tank top and was ready to go, running on pure adrenaline, in lieu of much-needed sleep. She couldn't leave the precious books behind— she didn't know if or when she'd be able to return, and they simply had to be preserved, by God, she *would* have children to pass them down to one day— so she'd packed them.

While she'd been at it, she'd been unable to resist tossing in a few other items she simply couldn't bear to leave: a soft cashmere afghan Gram had completed shortly before she died; a photo album; a much-loved locket; jeans, a few shirts, panties, bras, and shoes.

She'd firmly turned off her tears, a leaky faucet for which she simply couldn't afford a plumbing bill right now. Later, in some other city, in some other house, she would grieve the loss of her childhood home and virtually all her possessions. Later she would try to figure out if she dared resume her own name and finish law school at another college. Later she would take stock of all she'd so foolishly thrown away in one night with a single look. Later she might admit that her mother had been right

about her all along: She was a fairy-abduction waiting to happen.

Now she stood at the back door with two suitcases and a backpack crammed full.

Though the banks would open soon, she didn't dare waste any more time. She would stop somewhere in the late afternoon, in whatever state she'd managed to get to by that point, liquidate the special account, and find a safe place where she could lose herself and become someone else.

She took one last look around the kitchen she'd learned to bake cookies in, the kitchen in which she'd cried over her first boyfriend (and her latest— the bastard), the cozy room in which she and Grain had shared so many long talks, so many hopes and dreams.

Damn you, Adam Black, she thought bitterly. *Damn you for making me leave.*

The sharp clarity of anger helped blast away some of the fear fogging her mind. Squaring her shoulders, she slung the backpack over her shoulder and picked up her suitcases.

She was smart. She was strong. She was determined. She would outrun it. She *would* have her chance at a normal life: a career, a husband, and babies. So what if it meant changing her name and stalling all over? She would succeed.

Chin up, resolve firm, she opened the door.

Powerful body filling the doorway, it stood there, lips curved in a dangerous smile.

"Hello. Gabrielle." Adam Black said.

4

Adam arrived at 735 Monroe Street prepared for the woman to be a bit skittish.

After all, she'd run from him earlier, obviously intimidated by his overwhelming masculinity and epic sexuality. Women often had that reaction to him, especially when he was stripping off his pants. Or kilt, depending on the century.

He was also prepared, however, for her inhibitions to drop swiftly, as did all women's when they got a good, close-up look at him.

After that, many simply launched themselves at him in a full-frontal assault of sexual frenzy. He'd been entertaining himself with just that possibility, his entire body tight with lust, while tracking her down with the information he'd obtained in the room called "Human Resources" at Little & Staller.

But nothing in his vast repertoire of experience had prepared him for Gabrielle O'Callaghan

The bloodthirsty little hellion didn't react like any woman he'd ever encountered. She took one horrified look at him, drew back her arm, hauled off, and smashed him in the face with some kind of satchel she was holding.

Then slammed the door and locked it.

Leaving him on the doorstep, bleeding. Bleeding, by Danu, blood trickling from his lip!

Well, he'd just gotten confirmation that she was indeed fully immune to the *féth fiada*, or she'd not have been able to bust his lip. It wasn't quite how he'd imagined learning it.

His eyes narrowed, his teeth bared in a snarl.

Where the hell had that come from? He'd *never* been hit by a woman. None had ever raised a hand against him. Women adored him. Couldn't get enough of him. Fact was, they worshiped him. What the bloody hell was her problem?

Damned Irish. One could never predict the tempers of those fiery, moody Gaels. Obdurate as stones, they passed through the centuries untouched by evolution, as hotheaded and barbaric today as they'd been in the Iron Age.

He arched a brow, trying to fathom her reaction. He glanced down at himself. No latent part of the queen's curse had kicked in, mutating him into something hideous while he'd not been paying attention. He was still his usual irresistible self: the sexy, dark-eyed, muscle-bound Highland blacksmith who drove women wild.

After a moment's reflection, he decided that she just wanted to play rough. Liked her men dominant, aggressive, and dangerous.

He shrugged. Fine. After three hellish months of being cursed, three miserable months of celibacy, he was feeling all that and more.

He could use an outlet.

* * *

Gabby was at the front door, her hand closing on the doorknob, when the back door exploded open, spraying slivers of door frame and bits of dead bolt everywhere.

Metal and wood screeched protest as two-hundred-plus pounds of furious fairy blasted through it.

Knowing she had the lead by mere precious seconds, she turned the knob and yanked the door open, only to feel the thud of its palms on either side of her head, smashing it shut again.

Impossible! No way it could move that fast!

But it had, and now she was trapped: hard door in front, harder fairy behind.

For a few frantic moments she ducked and twisted, trying to escape, but it moved with her, seeming to anticipate her every feint and joust, bracing its hands on either side of her, caging her in with its powerful body.

Unable to evade, she went still as a cornered animal. Dozens of things to say collided in her mind, all of them beginning with a pathetic little "please." But she was damned if she was going to beg; it would probably *enjoy* that.

She bit her tongue and kept her mouth firmly shut. If she was

going to die, she would die proud. Stiffening stoically, she prepared herself to meet whatever grisly end it had in store for her.

But an end, she realized swiftly, wasn't what it had in mind at all.

Grazing its jaw against her hair, it growled low in its throat, and there was no mistaking the hungry, sensual edge to the sound.

Oh, God she thought wildly, *just like the Books said, it's going to try to seduce me before it kills me.*

It snared her hands and, though she struggled wildly, she was no match for its immense strength. Stretching her arms above her head, it flattened her palms against the door and molded all that rock-hard fairy body to hers.

Gabby's eyes flew wide.

Her first forbidden, absolutely electrifying fairy-feel. And with it, the answer to a question she'd been trying desperately not to wonder about for years.

No— they were not like mortal men. At least not any *she'd* ever felt. *Whuh.*

She swallowed. Hard. Despite the clothing between them, her skin positively sizzled where Adam was pressed against her. Heavens, she thought dimly, what would it feel like to rub her naked body up against a fairy? Might she go up in erotic flames?

"Is it rough love you're wanting, then, Irish?"

For a moment Gabby's brain was simply incapable of processing the content of what it had said, overwhelmed by sensation: the steely maleness of it prodding her behind; the spicy, masculine

scent of it; the sultry heat it was giving off; the seductive, deep, strangely accented voice. She was melting, knees going buttery-soft...

She inhaled a deep fortifying breath and forced herself to focus on the voice; rich Irish cream tumbling over broken glass, cultured, smoky, velvety. Thick with an exotic accent that her floundering mind realized was probably that of an ancient Celt. An accent she'd be willing to bet no living person had heard spoken in thousands of years. Filled with rolling *r*'s and softly dropped *g*'s and peculiarly shaped vowels.

Then the content of its question belatedly penetrated and so offended her that all she managed was "Huh?"

"Name your fancy, woman," it purred, lips braising the edge of her ear, sending shivers rippling up her spine. "Is it bondage? A bit of spanking?" A slow, hard, sensual thrust against her bottom punctuated the last question. "Or just a good, hard fucking?"

Gabby opened and closed her mouth several times, but no sound came out. Then, blessedly, outrage stiffened her spine and freed her tongue. "Ooh! None of the above! My *fancy* is for you to remove that... that... *thing* from my butt!"

"You don't mean that," came the deep, self-assured reply. Accompanied by another sinfully erotic movement of its hips.

Could it *be* more arrogant? "I do too. I'm serious. Get it off me!" Before she did something really, really stupid, like pressed back against it the next time it rubbed.

Aw, come on, Gabby; this is the most turned on you're ever been in your entire life, a devilish inner (suspiciously fourteen-

year-old-sounding) voice provoked. *What could it hurt to finally get a little taste of fairy? You're already blown it.*

It's here to kill us! she countered fiercely.

We don't know that. Silence, then a plaintive: *And if it is, do you really want to die a virgin?*

Gabby was horrified to realize that for a moment she actually entertained that question as a legitimate avenue of inquiry. Reasonable. Sane even. How sad it would be to die a virgin.

Oh, grow up, she seethed, regaining her senses, *this is not a fairy tale. There's not going to be a Happily-Ever-After here.*

Happy now? came the hopeful query.

She was losing it. Completely.

It tried to turn her then, and she fought a momentary, pointless little battle with it, making herself heavy and stiff in its grasp. She knew it was stupid, that she was just stalling for time, but she'd stall for all the time she could get. Feeling it behind her was bad enough; being forced to look at it while it was touching her would be downright devastating.

It picked her up and rotated her. Literally plucked her from the floor and spun her about, depositing her on her feet again.

She fixed her gaze at eye level: its sternum. Damn the thing for being so big and making her feel so tiny and helpless. At five foot four, she was accustomed to having to look up at people, but the darkest fairy was at least a foot taller than she was, and nearly twice her mass.

It slipped a finger beneath her chin. "Look at me." Again, that dark, strangely accented voice caressed her. There should be a

law against men— fairies— having such voices, she thought grimly.

She kept her chin firmly down. She knew how inhumanly erotic it was. She also knew— the little argument she'd just had with herself showcased the point well— that she had a lifetime of dangerous fairy-fascination corked up inside her. And that cork was too highly pressurized.

"I said," it repeated evenly, a hint of impatience edging its tone, "look at me. Gabrielle O'Callaghan."

Gah-bry-yil was how it pronounced her name. What its gorgeous accent did to her last name was simply beyond describing. She'd never known her own name could sound so sexy.

No way was she looking up.

There was a moment of silence, then it said mockingly. "Willy-nilly, peahen. I thought the Irish were tougher than that. What happened to the wench who bashed me a good one and made me bleed?"

Her head whipped back and she stared up at its dark, chiseled face: *Fairies didn't bleed*.

There was blood on its lip. Crimson drops dripping from the corner of that full sensual mouth, making it look even more elemental and dangerous.

Blood? Gabby gaped, trying to comprehend what she was seeing. Was it a fairy or wasn't it? The *Books* had said it was! What in the world was going on?

"You put it there. I'm giving you the chance to get it off before I

decide to claim vengeance instead." Its dark, smoldering gaze dropped to her mouth and fixed there. "Your tongue will serve well. Come, a kiss to make amends."

When she scowled and didn't move an inch, it gave her a coolly smug smile. "Oh, come, *ka-lyrra*, taste me. We both know you want to."

Its supreme arrogance (no matter that it was entirely right about her wanting to taste it) pushed her over the edge. She'd been up for twenty-four hours straight and was emotionally exhausted by what had been the most horrid day in her entire life. She was beginning to feel strangely numb, almost beyond caring.

"Go to hell, Adam Black," she hissed.

For a brief moment it looked completely taken aback. Then it tossed its dark head back and laughed. Gabby shivered as the sound coursed over her, rolled through the room, echoing off the high ceilings.

Not human laughter. Definitely not human.

"Ah, Irish, I'm already there." It cupped her jaw in one big hand and forced her head back, locking gazes with her. "Know what that means?"

Gabby shook her head tightly, in as much as she could with her face clamped in its implacable grasp.

"It means that I've got nothing left to lose." Pressing the pad of its thumb against her bottom lip, it forced her mouth open, and began lowering its head toward hers. "But I'll bet you do. I'll bet you've got all kinds of things to lose, don't you, Gabrielle?"

5

Far too many things to lose, Gabby thought glumly.

Her virginity. Her world. Her life. And— if it had its wicked way — probably in precisely that order.

At the very last moment, just before its lips claimed hers, its grip on her face relaxed slightly and she did the only thing she could think of: She head-butted it.

Snapped her head back, then forward again, and bashed it square in the face as hard as she could.

So hard, in fact, that it made her woozy and gave her an instant migraine, making her wonder how Jean-Claude Van Damme always managed to coolly continue fighting after such a stunt. Obviously, movies lied.

She wished she'd known that before she'd tried playing action hero.

Fortunately, it appeared she'd hurt it more than she'd hurt herself, because she recovered faster.

Fast enough to land a direct hit with her knee to its groin while it was still looking dazed.

The sound it made as it doubled over sent pure panic lancing through her veins. It was a sound of such affront, of such

animalistic rage and pain, that she really, *really* didn't want to be around by the time it managed to recover.

As it sank down to the floor, groaning and cupping itself, she dashed past it, making a frantic beeline toward the back door. There was no point in bothering with the front door. She'd never be able to outrun it on foot. She needed her car.

She darted through the living room, skittered around the table in the dining room, and burst into the kitchen.

Looming ahead of her— freedom— an open rectangle of doorway, splashed with morning sun.

She could still hear it cursing, three rooms away, as she reached the threshold. The hell with her luggage, she thought, leaping over it, she'd be lucky to escape with her life and she knew it.

Vaulting through the open doorway, she—

Slammed into Adam Black's rock-hard body all over again.

She screamed when it caught her roughly, lifting her up until her feet dangled helplessly above the ground. The expression on its stunning dark face was icy and terrifying.

It crushed her against its body, tightening its arms around her until the air was whistling as she tried to suck it into her lungs. And she knew, if it tightened its powerful arms just a little bit more, her oxygen would be cut off completely.

It kept her like that for long painful moments, and she went perfectly still, face buried in its neck, its torque pressing into her cheek, willing herself to be soft and limp, to exude a nonthreatening air. She sensed instinctively that she'd pushed it to the brink, and if she evidenced even the slightest degree of

resistance, it would respond with even greater force.

Her body wasn't going to be able to withstand greater force.

So it was true, she thought dismally as it held her immobile, the Fae *could* move about in the blink of an eye. One instant it had been lying on the floor three rooms behind her, the next it was in the doorway in front of her. How on earth was she going to escape something that could move like that? What else could it do? Suddenly her mind was stuffed to overflowing with all Gram had ever taught her about the Fae, all the horrifying powers they possessed. The ability to mesmerize humans, control them, bend them to their every whim.

Could she *be* in any deeper shit?

After what seemed an interminably long time, it drew a deep, shuddering breath.

Just as she was drawing a shaky breath to start apologizing, or more accurately, begin begging for a swift and merciful death, it said with silky menace:

"Now it's not just my *lip* you'll be needing to kiss if you're wishing to make amends with me, Irish."

* * *

Five minutes later Gabby was securely tied to one of her dining-

room chairs with her own clothesline.

Wrists bound behind her to the ladder-back chair, ankles snugly roped to the legs.

Dispiritedly she wondered how it was possible that a person's life could go so thoroughly to hell in a handbasket in so short a time. Only yesterday morning the biggest worry on her mind had been what to wear to her interview. Whether Ms. Temple might think a black suit too severe, a brown one too modest, a pink one too frivolous. High heels too flirty? Low heels too butch? Hair up or down?

God, had she really worried about such things?

Mornings like this certainly put one's life in perspective.

Dragging a chair around to face hers, Adam Black dropped into it, legs spread, elbows on its knees, leaning forward, mere inches from her. A long silky fall of midnight hair spilled over its muscular shoulder, brushing her thigh. The thing clearly had no concept of personal space. It was much too close. Just as she thought that, it raised a hand toward her. She flinched, but it only grazed her cheek with its knuckles, then slowly traced the pad of its thumb over her lower lip.

She tossed her head defiantly, averting her face. A finger beneath her chin forced her to turn back.

"Ah, yes, I like you this way much better." Its dark eyes glittered, sparking gold.

"I don't like *you* any way." Jaw jutting, she tipped her nose skyward. Dignity, she reminded herself. She would not die without it.

"I think I got that, Irish. Best bear in mind you're at my mercy. And I'm not feeling particularly merciful at the moment. Perhaps you should endeavor to *keep* me liking you."

She muttered something she rarely said. A thing Gram would have washed out her mouth with soap for.

Its eyes flared with instant heat. Then it laughed darkly, wiping blood from its lip with the back of its hand. "That's not what you were saying a few minutes ago."

"That's *not* how I meant it and you know it."

Its laughter stopped abruptly and its gaze turned cold. "Ah, but I'm afraid I'm a very literal man, *ka-lyrra*. Don't say that to me again unless you mean it. Because I will take you up on it. And I won't give you the chance to take it back. Just those two words. Say them to me again and I'll be all over you. On the floor. Me and you. Say it. Go ahead."

Gabby gritted her teeth and stared down at the hardwood floor, counting dust bunnies. *No more than you deserve, Gabby, Moira O'Callaghan chided in her mind. I raised you better than that.*

Great, she thought mulishly, now everyone was ganging up on her. Even dead people.

The finger was back beneath her chin, forcing her to meet its shimmery gaze. "Got it?"

" 'Got it,' " she clipped.

"Good." A pause, a measuring look. "So tell me, Gabrielle O'Callaghan, what exactly is it you believe my people do to the *Sidhe-seers*?"

She shrugged nonchalantly— in as much as she was able, tied so securely— not about to admit to anything. A *sidhe-seer*, it'd called her, the archaic name for what she was. She'd encountered it in the *Books of the Fae*, but never heard it spoken aloud. "I have no idea what you're talking ab— "

It made an impatient noise and laid a finger to her lips, shushing her, "Irish, don't dissemble with me, I have no patience for it. The *féth fiada* doesn't work on you, and you called me by name. I admit, when first I caught you looking at me, I was perplexed, but there's no other explanation for your behavior. It's why you fought me. You know all about my race, don't you?"

After a long moment Gabby swallowed and nodded tightly. She had well and truly betrayed herself, first by being caught looking at it, then by telling it to "go to hell" by name. It knew. And it was clearly not in the mood for games. "So what now?" she asked stiffly. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I've no intention of killing you, *ka-lyrra*. Though indeed there was a time a *Sidhe-seer's* life was forfeited if caught, my people haven't spilled human blood since The Compact governing our races was negotiated." It swept a fall of hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear, its hand lingering, tracing the curve of her cheek. "Nor do I plan to hurt you, unless you hurt me again, at which point all bets are off. As of this moment I'm willing to wipe the slate clean between us, consider your hostility a misunderstanding. Allow that a wee thing like you— believing your life in jeopardy— would feel driven to fight dirty against a man like me. However, if you hurt me again, you'll pay tenfold. Understand?"

Gabby nodded stiffly, wishing it would stop touching her. The

mere brush of its hand made her skin tingle, made all the muscles in her lower stomach clench. How dare the embodiment of her worst nightmare come packaged as her hottest fantasy?

It leaned back in the chair, swept its hands through its long dark hair, then laced its fingers together behind its head. Its powerful arms rippled with the movement, cut shoulders bulging beneath the black T-shirt, massive biceps flexing, gold armbands glinting in the morning sun spilling through the tall windows. It took immense effort to keep her gaze firmly fixed on its face, keep it from sweeping down over all that fairy perfection.

The *Books of the Fae* contained dozens of tales about how, in the days of yore, on nights when the moon hung fat and full against a violet dusk and the Wild Hunt ran, young maidens had raced into the forests, hoping to be taken by one of the exotic Fae males. Had gone willingly to their doom.

Gabby O'Callaghan would *never* be such a fool. Whatever it had in store for her, she would fight it every inch of the way.

"A *Sidhe-seer*," it said, dark gaze scrutinizing her intently "It never occurred to me to look for one of you, that any of you might still be about. Aoibheal believes the Hunters eliminated the last of you long ago, as did I. How many others of your bloodline have the vision?"

"I'm the last." For the first time in her life she was grateful she had no other family members who shared her curse. There was no one else to protect; only her own survival was at stake.

While it studied her, she pondered its words.

Ah-veel, it had said: the High Queen of the Seelie, Court of the Light. *Hunters*: The mere word iced her blood. As a child they'd been the bogeyman in her every closet, the monster beneath her every bed. Handpicked by the queen and dispatched to hunt the *Sidhe-seers*, they were ruthless, terrifying creatures that hailed from the Unseelie King's hellish realm of shadow and ice. She might not know all the Fae by name— there were too many, and they donned too many different glamours for that— but Gram had taught her about the most powerful ones at a young age.

"Your mother is no longer alive?"

"She doesn't have the vision." *Stay away from my mom, you bastard.*

"Then how did she protect you?"

Gabby flinched inwardly. *I can't protect her, damn it, Mother! How can I protect her from something I can't see?* Jilly had shouted at Moira O'Callaghan on that dark, snowy night so long ago. Three days later her mother was gone.

"Who taught you how to hide from us?" it pressed. "Not that you did a very good job at it." A smirk curved its sensual lips. "But then, women never have been able to keep their eyes off me."

"Oh, you are so arrogant. I just couldn't figure out if you were a fairy or not," Gabby snapped.

A dark eyebrow arched. "And you thought the answer to that question might be found in my pants? That's why you were looking there?" Its dark gaze shimmered with amusement.

"The only reason I looked there," she said, flushing, "was because I couldn't believe you would just so blatantly... re-

rearrange your— your..." She trailed off, then hissed, "What is it with men? Women don't do things like that! Move their... their personal parts about in public."

"Mores the pity. I, for one, would find it quite fascinating." Its gaze dropped to her breasts.

The raw sexual heat in its gaze made her nipples tighten. Made her shiver. How could its mere gaze have as much tactile impact as if it had dragged a velvety tongue across her skin? "It was your eyes that threw me," she gutted. "I thought all fairies had iridescent eyes. I was off-kilter, trying to figure out what you were."

"My eyes," it said lazily, gaze raking slowly back up to her face. "I see. So how is it you learned to hide?"

Gabby blew out a breath. "My grandmother was also a *Sidhe-seer*. She raised me. But she's dead now. I'm the last." She couldn't resist asking. "So why don't you have iridescent eyes? And why do you bleed?"

"Long story, *ka-lyrra*. And one you're about to get very involved in."

At that, another shiver kissed her spine. "You're really not going to kill me?" she said warily. She was exhausted; mentally, physically, and emotionally wrung out. Her head was still pounding from head-butting the fairy, and she was desperate for reassurance, any reassurance. Even if it came from her enemy.

"Oh, no, *ka-lyrra*," it purred silkily. "That would be such a waste. I have far better uses for you than that."

Well, she'd gotten her "reassurance."

Too bad it wasn't even remotely reassuring.

6

Far better uses indeed, Adam thought, leaning back in his chair, watching emotions skitter across her delicate features like sunlight rippling across a loch. Anger warred with exhaustion, frustration dueled with fear.

By Danu, she was beautiful. But beauty alone had never been enough to pique his interest. Passion was his magnet. Mortal fire drew his immortal ice.

And what a fiery thing she was. Defiant. Brave. Aggressive. The golden glow of her immortal soul illuming her from within was more vibrant, more intense than most humans, a hot amber aura surrounding her, marking her as a veritable tempest-in-a-teapot of passion. Half his size and still she'd fought him like a wild thing, a hissing spitfire with a lethally hard head and deadly knees; and although he'd just suffered more pain in the past half hour than he had in his entire existence, he was not particularly displeased. Pissed off in a fundamentally male way, but not displeased.

He had his very own *Sidhe-seer*. One who made him bum with lust. Touching female flesh on a human body was exquisite. He'd been right: Sex in human form was going to be incredible, a new experience, a rare thing in an immortal's existence, and all the sweeter for it. Merely crushing her against the door, feeling her generous, sweet ass cushioning his cock had made

his body shake with desire.

Shake. Him. He'd never trembled in his life. Never suffered even the mildest involuntary shudder.

A shameless voyeur, he'd spied on lovers uncounted over the millennia, avidly watching them, studying their bedplay. He'd watched giants of men, hardened warriors with scarred bodies and iced hearts, men made brutal by war and famine and death, tremble like inexperienced boys from the mere touch of a woman.

He'd never understood it. He'd wanted to understand it. He did now.

The press of her hips against his heavy loins had flooded him with raw, primal aggression. Never had he felt such an overwhelming imperative to mate. Never had he had such a vicious, raging hard-on.

And even now, despite his residual pain, he hungered to touch her. Resented the very air that separated their bodies. Needed to feel her again. Shifting in the chair, he moved his knee between hers so it was brushing her inner thigh, not missing how her leg instantly tensed. Ah, much better. For a moment he couldn't drag his gaze from the ripe press of her round breasts against the soft fabric of her shirt. Christ, he couldn't wait to get his mouth on them.

But not by force. He might tempt, lure, and manipulate, but none could accuse the consummate seducer of resorting to something so banal as force. Not him. It was a point he prided himself on. Those who fell prey to his machinations fell of their own accord. When they chose to take what he offered— and they always did— any black marks on their souls were their

own.

A *Sidhe-seer*. He'd never have even thought to go searching for one.

Gabrielle O'Callaghan was a wild card of the finest sort, a possibility Aoibheal hadn't taken into account when she'd levied the *féth fiada* against him, believing them all long dead.

As had he.

The last *Sidhe-seer* he'd encountered had been over two thousand years ago, in the first century AD., deep in a towering, lush forest in Ireland, a wizened and withered old crone. He'd not bothered to alert the Hunters; she'd been courting Death's kiss anyway. He'd sat and told her tales for a time, answered her many questions. A few years later he'd returned, gathered her fragile, dried-up husk of a body in his arms, and taken her to a secluded beach on the Isle of Morar. She'd died looking out at an ocean so intensely, brilliantly aquamarine that it made humans weep. She'd died with the scent of jasmine and sandalwood in her nostrils, not the stench of her filthy one-room hut. She'd died with a smile on her lips.

But this one— could he have been more blessed by Fate? Young, strong, defiant, beautiful. And why not? Fate was a woman, and women always aided Adam Black. As would this one once he'd allayed her misgivings.

She'd been raised to fear and despise his kind and would require a thorough seduction. Once, the mere fact that he was Fae would have inspired unstinting obedience, but the world had changed much since such times, as had the nature of women. They were stronger, far more independent. No longer were they willing to spend their lives hidden in a forest,

forswearing the bearing of progeny lest they pass on the vision and, one day, have to watch the grim, nightmarish Hunters slay their offspring.

Ah, yes, times had changed, as the Tuatha Dé had changed, too, been forced to change when Queen Aoibheal had accepted the terms and many limits of the sacred Compact on behalf of their race. No longer were they permitted to spill human blood, lest The Compact be voided, and any Tuatha Dé who violated it condemned to the grimmest fate for one of their kind: a soulless death. Although, should the queen or any of his race, for that matter, hear hint of the existence of a *Sidhe-seer*, the Hunters would still be instantly dispatched, they would no longer be permitted to slaughter their prey.

However, Gabrielle O'Callaghan didn't know that, as the terms of The Compact were secret from all mortals but the MacKeltar, a Highland clan of ancient bloodline descended from the first Druids, and sole keepers of Man's end of the treaty.

Hence, when he'd appeared at her door, she'd believed she was fighting for her life. Adam shook his head. Even on his worst days in his worst centuries, when he'd been the worst kind of immortal, ungoverned by any Compact, he'd not have killed this one. Played hard and rough with her? Certainly. Killed her? Never.

Ka-lyrra, he'd called her, not realizing just how accurate it was. The *ka-lyrra* was a creature native to his homeworld, Danu. Silky-pelted, exquisitely marked, with huge, phosphorescent eyes, velvety paws, and a striped, tufted tail, its delicate beauty tempted, but its bite was dangerous, even to a Tuatha Dé; not killing but causing madness of considerable duration. Few were they who could woo it; few were they who dared to try.

Indeed the appellation suited her. She was certainly maddening; only the second mortal woman he'd ever encountered who hadn't melted into a puddle of accommodating, adoring femininity for him. Even the crone *Sidhe-seer* had been girlishly flirtatious with him. At the end, he'd gifted her a glamour of beauty and taken her last breath with a kiss.

"Well?" she snapped, jarring him from his reverie. "What 'uses'?"

Adam studied her. Anger had won the battle for control of her facial muscles, drawing her lips in a delicate sneer, flaring her nostrils. Still, apprehension shadowed her lovely eyes. He didn't want her fearing him. Fear would interfere with his plans to experience human sex with her and use her as his intermediary to regain his immortality. "I told you I have no intention of harming you, and I meant it. I merely seek your aid with a small problem."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You seek my aid? How could I possibly aid an all-powerful fairy?"

"I'm not all-powerful at the moment." Now she would begin to relax.

"Really? Do tell."

Her eyes narrowed a bit too calculatingly for his taste. Relaxed was one thing, but he had no intention of walking around on constant guard against those treacherous knees. I may not be all-powerful, Gabrielle," he said softly, "but even diminished, I am far more powerful than you. Indeed, far more powerful than most humans. Need you a reminder?" He stretched lazily in his chair, fully aware of how his body rippled and flexed.

She growled, actually growled low in her throat at him.

"I didn't think so." he said, lips curving faintly. Small and currently helpless as a kitten, she sported a lion's share of ferocity; her lush, five-foot-four-inch body jam-packed with six feet of temper. "Listen well, *Sidhe-seer*..."

* * *

Gabby listened well indeed while he talked, eyes narrowing, taking meticulous mental notes.

What he told her fanned the spark of hope in her heart into flame. Not only was he not all-powerful, but he was actually trapped in mortal form.

All that splendidly masculine body is human? cooed a breathy, traitorous voice in her mind.

Oh, shut up. How was it possible that a fourteen-year-old version of herself was still skulking around inside her head?

And not only was he flesh and blood— which explained why he'd bled and didn't have typical fairy eyes— but he'd been cursed by the full triumvirate power of the *féth fiada*, which, he told her, made it impossible for humans to perceive him. Effected illusion and affected memory, weaving chaos like a cloak around him. Except for her— descended from an ancient line of *Sidhe-seers* on whom Fae magic didn't work the way it

was supposed to.

Further compounding his problems, he could no longer traverse realms. He was stuck in the human one.

Gabby couldn't believe he was telling her all this. He was revealing, without reservation, that he posed no otherworldly threat to her. That he couldn't carry her off, couldn't summon the Hunters. And he was stripped of his fairy magic to boot!

Though he refused to answer when she asked for what offense the queen had punished him, she didn't press. She didn't really care. What mattered was that, in his current condition, he posed no greater threat than any other human man— albeit an extraordinarily large and strong one.

She was going to survive. She really wasn't going to die today! After all, he couldn't kill her; she was all he had, the only one who could see him. He *needed her*.

That realization went a long way toward calming her nerves. She wasn't dealing with impending death, she was dealing with impending battle, and those were two very different things.

Wait a minute, she thought suddenly, frowning as her mind latched on to an inconsistency: He claimed to be powerless, but was still able to move in the blink of an eye like a fairy. How could that be? She needed to know precisely what she was up against. "I thought you said Aoibheal stripped your powers. Why can you still move like a fairy?"

He shrugged. "It's the only power she left me— the ability to sift short distances."

"Why would she leave you anything at all?" she pressed, wondering if he was telling her the truth.

"I suspect," he replied dryly, "so buses wouldn't run me over while I was trying to adjust to my new form. She wishes me to suffer, not die."

"But she left you nothing else?"

He shook his head and gave her a chiding glance. "Don't think to escape me, Gabrielle. I won't permit it. It would be unwise to think me"— he paused a moment, as if choosing his next words with care, and smiled faintly— "impotent... in anyway."

"And why do you want me to talk to this Circenn Brodie person?" she forged on, refusing to acknowledge his thinly veiled threat. *Think him impotent?* With all that testosterone and virility dripping from his pores? Ha. She'd as easily mistake the Sahara Desert for the North Pole.

"Because he has the power to return me to the Fae realm."

"Is he a fairy too?" She stiffened instantly. No more fairies. There was no way she was going to reveal herself to another one, especially not one that possessed all its powers.

"Half-Fae. But he chooses to reside in the mortal world."

Still too dangerous, even if only a half-blood. "And after I act as your intermediary and he takes you back to Faery, then what?"

Then all will be made right, and I'll be invincible again."

She rolled her eyes. "I meant, what happens to me? While you may be the most important thing to your egotistical little self in your narcissistic little world, guess what— so am I in mine."

His eyes glittered and he laughed. Tossed back his dark head, white teeth flashing, muscles in his corded neck flexing, and she bit back a soft, appreciative moan. His body might be human,

but it was dusted with Fae exoticness, from his incredible gold-velvet skin, to those eyes that flashed with shimmering gold sparks no human had, to his flat-out intimidating sexual presence. Potent, larger-than-life Fae essence bottled— and not quite capped— in a mortal body. And a perfect mortal body at that.

Simply deadly. A pure fairy could not have tempted her so. She would have kept telling herself it was a "thing." But now that she knew he was all human male beneath that black T-shirt and those snug, faded jeans, he seemed like an entirely different—
Eew!

Her spine went rigid as the back of her chair. She snapped up straight so violently that she nearly toppled herself over.

How long had she been thinking of it as "he" and "him" in her mind?

Oh! She wanted to spit, to scrape the foul taste of her own betrayal off her tongue! Had her grandmother taught her nothing? She closed her eyes, shutting it out, painstakingly rebuilding its it-ness in her mind.

After a few moments she opened than again. *It* had not yet answered her. "I said," she repeated, "what about me?"

"Anything you want, *ka-lyrra*," it purred "You have but to name it." Its gaze raked over her body appreciatively, hungrily, those dark eyes promising the fulfillment of any fantasy she might harbor in her deepest heart. It wet its lower lip with its tongue, caught it with its teeth, then gave her the slowest, sexiest smile she'd ever seen. "Whisper in my ear, Gah-bry-yil, your deepest desires, and I shall make them yours."

Yeah, right, she thought acerbically (stoically refusing to ponder, for even a moment, its offer of unlimited sexual fantasy that was making her stomach feel kind of sick, but not in a sick way at all), it would forget about her in a heartbeat. The moment it was its impervious, all-powerful, immortal self again.

But she'd be willing to bet no *other* fairy would. If it was, indeed, Aoibheal herself who'd punished it, barring it from the Fae realm, wouldn't she want to know exactly how Adam Black had gotten back to Faery without her royal consent?

And that would lead the formidable queen to Circenn Brodie (assuming this Brodie person didn't just immediately hand Gabby over) and ultimately to Gabby herself. And then the Hunters would come thundering down on nightmarish hooves to steal her away and— if they no longer killed mortals as it claimed— she could look forward instead to a lifetime of servitude to a host of arrogant, cold demigods.

That was so not going to happen.

"What if I don't?" she asked stiffly, bracing herself for the worst.

It arched a dark brow. "What if you don't what?"

"What if I don't help you?"

"Why would you not aid me? Such a small thing I ask of you. Merely to speak to someone."

"Oh, please. Betray myself to more of your kind and fling myself on Fae mercy? As if *that's* not an oxymoron. Believe you'd just let a *Sidhe-seer* walk away and live out her life in peace? I'm not that stupid."

It leaned forward, elbows on its knees, all amusement vanishing

from its features, leaving its chiseled visage quietly regal, dignified. "I give you my word, Gabrielle O'Callaghan," it said softly. "I will protect you."

"Right. The word of the blackest fairy, the legendary liar, the great deceiver," she mocked. How dare it offer its word like it might actually mean something?

A muscle leapt in its jaw. "That is not all I have been, Gabrielle. I have been, and am. many things."

"Oh, of course, silly me, I left out consummate seducer and ravager of innocence."

Its eyes narrowed. "I have not ravaged yours. Though I smell it on you. And though I could with little effort, as I am twice your size."

Oh! Surely it couldn't smell that she was a virgin, could it? A mere technicality, at that. Flushing, she snapped. "And what guarantee do I have that you won't?"

A dangerous smile sparked an equally dangerous glint in its eyes. "None. In fact. I guarantee you I will. But I'll grant you this pledge: When I do, it will be because you're asking it of me. Standing in front of me. Asking me to fuck you."

Its words slammed into her like a brick wall, almost knocking the breath out of her, as it had meant them to. It had masculine intimidation down to a fine art. She inhaled sharply, preparing to snap back, to deny, to insist it would be a cold day in hell, but it surged up from its chair and stood, towering over her.

"Enough. Do you intend to aid me or not, Gabrielle?"

Gabby swallowed hard, sifting frantically through her meager

options. Damn it all, if she helped it, she just *knew* she'd end up taken by the Fae. There was no way they'd let her walk away free. No way. They hadn't spent thousands of years hunting down and destroying the *Sidhe-seers*, only to let one go now. Especially not one young enough to spawn a whole future line of *Sidhe-seers*.

And what if they decided to take her mother too? What if they refused to believe Jilly truly didn't possess the vision she'd bequeathed to her daughter? Happily remarried with three stepchildren, her mom would never forgive her! Not that they had the best relationship as things stood, but she had no desire to make things any worse.

And what if, discovering that *she'd* eluded them— that they'd been wrong about the last of the *Sidhe-seers* being wiped out—the Fae began to hunt them again in earnest. Gabby had no doubt that somewhere in the world there were others like her, hiding, keeping their heads down, trying to live normal lives. There were entries in the *Books of the Fae* that made vague reference to other bloodlines similarly cursed, claiming that once there had been many. Gabby wasn't fool enough to think that only the O'Callaghan women had figured out how to survive. What if her betrayal caused them all to become persecuted anew? If even one other *Sidhe-seer* was ferreted out and captured because of her, she would bear the responsibility for their grim fate.

What a mess she'd made of things!

I give you my word it had said, I will protect you. But Gabby'd not been raised by Walt Disney, she'd been spoon-fed fairy tales of the darkest kind since birth. She was incapable of trusting it. And even if, by some bizarre chance it actually meant what it

said, it couldn't defend her against the queen. Aoibheal held the throne above all four Houses of Fae royalty, and wielded the greatest power of all. If Aoibheal wanted her, Aoibheal would get her. Period.

She had no choice but to fight and resist until the bitter end.

Bracing herself for its rage, for whatever awful thing it would do to her once she asserted her refusal, she tipped her head back, and back more, to meet its imperious gaze.

"No. I'm not going to help you." She sucked in a shallow breath and held it anxiously.

It stared down at her an interminable moment, gaze inscrutable, saying nothing, doing nothing.

And she waited, nerves strung like tiny wires being ruthlessly pulled by a puppeteer to near-breaking point.

She braced herself to be hit. She fully expected it to hurt her, to attempt to coerce her with physical violence; perhaps even just short of death, and she prayed she would be strong enough to endure. It *was* a fairy after all. It had no conscience, no soul. She expected it to do whatever it had to do to get its way.

She expected anything but what it did next. Inclined its head.

Bent to her feet and untied them.

Reached its powerful arms around her, its gold armbands cool against her skin, its silky hair brushing her cheek, its spicy scent enveloping her.

And freed her hands.

As she sat, too confused and afraid to move, it stepped back and

rose to its full height, a faint smile playing at its firm, sensual lips.

And vanished.

7

Gabby went to work.

Running on zero sleep and pure nerves, fueled by an icy shower, two Starbucks double-shot espressos, and a need for normalcy, any normalcy.

Maybe her life was falling apart around her ears, but she could pretend it wasn't.

Besides, despite her exhaustion, she knew she'd never be able to sleep. She was too on edge, too afraid of what it was going to do next, for she had no doubt that it would do *something*. Had she remained at home by herself, she would have driven herself crazy, her overactive imagination conjuring an endless array of hideous fates for herself.

Initially, when it had vanished, she'd considered resorting to her first plan: hopping in her car and running while the running was good. But somehow she just knew, deep in the marrow of her bones, that running wasn't going to accomplish anything. She wasn't sure she believed its claim that it had no other Fae powers but the ability to sift place. She certainly wasn't fool enough to think that, considering she was the only one who could see it, it had truly gone away and intended to leave her alone.

No, it would never have left her alone if it hadn't been

unequivocally certain of its ability to find her again. Which meant running would be a waste of time and energy best conserved for the battle to come. Besides, she'd reasoned, if she was going to stand and fight, she was better equipped to do it on familiar turf. Here at least, they were in her world, and she knew her way around.

Why hadn't it hurt her? Why hadn't it used its immensely superior strength to bully her, to bend her to its will? It could have so easily. She was stymied by its reaction, or rather, its lack of one. It could have done anything it had wanted to do to her as she'd sat there helplessly tied up, but it hadn't even so much as uttered the slightest villainous threat.

It had vanished. Simply vanished. And it had been smiling. And that made her deeply, deeply uneasy. Like it had something far worse planned for her than mere force.

What could be worse than force?

Like waiting for the other shoe to drop, not knowing when or where it would come.

"O'Callaghan, where in the hell are the Brighton contentions?" her boss, senior partner Jeff Staller, demanded, looming over her tiny desk in her cramped cubicle strewn with files and law books and crumpled wads of legal briefs that just weren't coining together. "That case was supposed to be filed last week. We're never going to get a September hearing date now."

Gabby's head shot up. Startled, she almost knocked over her fourth espresso of the day. Bleary-eyed, she glanced at the clock. It was two-thirty already. "I'll have it for you by four o'clock," she promised.

"You were supposed to have it for me by four o'clock yesterday, but you didn't bother coming back in to work after lunch. Reason for that?"

She kept her eyes trained on the clock, reluctant to meet his gaze, aware she wasn't the most convincing liar. "I... uh, got sick. I got really sick. I had sushi for lunch."

"You said you were going to Skyline for chili. "

Damn the man for having a mind like a steel trap. Didn't he have anything better to do than remember where she'd said she was going to eat? She *had* muttered something about Skyline when she'd passed him on the way out, not wanting him to know she was interviewing around. Knowing he'd work her ten times as hard for it. Unless the firm one was interning for believed them an eventual hire, they were downright brutal with the workload.

"I changed my mind at the last minute," she said glibly. "I'm sorry I didn't phone in, but I was so sick I could hardly move. You know how food poisoning is." She forced herself to tip her face up and meet his glowering gaze, knowing she looked a fright from lack of sleep and stress, and that the dark circles beneath her eyes would reinforce her lie.

"*I'm lying and deceitful?*" a deep, exotically-accented voice purred behind her. "Guess we have something in common, Irish."

Her head whipped around. So there it was; the other shoe was dropping. Sprawled insolently on the file cabinet behind her was Adam Black, all preternatural insouciance and grace. Gone were the sexy faded jeans. Now it spotted snug black leather pants and a black silk shirt, complemented by gold armbands

and torque. New, *very* expensive-looking boots, too, she noticed, briefly distracted into wondering where/how it got its clothes. Probably just stole whatever it wanted, cloaked by the *féth fiada*, she thought disparagingly. Figured. Thief.

Still, it was impossible not to notice that he— *it*— looked Old World elegant and simply to-die-for. *Careful Gabby, could be prophetic.*

"We have *nothing* in common," she hissed.

"What?" Jeff said blankly. "O'Callaghan, what are you talking about?"

Gabby winced, turning back to her boss. He was frowning, his gaze darting between her and the filing cabinet. She cleared her throat. "You and I, I meant," she blurted hastily. "What I meant was that *you* probably wouldn't have even gotten sick, but my digestive system is really sensitive, it always has been. The least little thing sets it off. especially raw fish that hasn't been properly prepared, and I should have known better than to trust sushi from a street vendor, but I was hungry, and it looked good, and, listen, I'm really sorry, but I swear it'll be on your desk by four." *Breathe now, Gabby.* She breathed and punctuated it with the brightest smile she could muster, which not only felt more like a grimace but came out rather lopsided as well.

Stony-faced, impressed neither by her explanation nor the way she'd managed to mutilate a smile, he growled, "Too late. I'm due in court in ten minutes and won't be back in time to log it. It had better be on my desk when I come in in the morning. And the Desny case. *And* the Elliot contentions. Got it?"

"Yes," Gabby said, gutting her teeth.

As he turned away, she shot a furious look over her shoulder at the fairy on the files. It winked and flashed her a lazy sexy smile.

"And, O'Callaghan..." Gabby's head swung back around.

"While you're at it, let's see what kind of case-precedence you can establish for the Rollins case. On my desk by Monday morning"

Only when he'd disappeared into his office did Gabby let her shoulders droop and her head fall onto her desk with a soft thud.

"Why do you do this, Irish?" came the velvety purr from behind her. "It's a glorious day outside. The sun is shining. The world is a vast adventure begging to be had. Yet you sit in this cramped little box and take orders. Why? "

She didn't even bother raising her head. She was just too tired to be afraid anymore. Fear required energy, and she'd depleted her reserves hours ago. "Because I have to pay the bills. Because not all of us get to be all-powerful. Because this is life."

"This isn't life. This is hell."

Gabby raised her head and opened her mouth to dispute that, then took a good look around. It was Thursday. It would take her the rest of the day to finish up the Brighton arbitration. All of tomorrow to wrap up the Desny and Elliot contentions. And digging up case-precedence for the Rollins trial? Well, she might as well just drag a cot into the office for the weekend. Yes, she thought dismally, life at Little & Staller *was* hell.

"What are you doing here?" she said wearily. "Did you come to torture me? Bully me into compliance? Just get whatever it is over with, okay? Kill me. Put me out of my misery. Or don't. I

have work to do." She puffed her bangs from her eyes with a sigh, refusing to look at it.

"Brutality is the refuge of the dull of mind, *ka-lyrra*. Only a fool conquers when he might instead seduce."

"Great. A fairy that reads Voltaire," she muttered. "Go away."

"A fairy that knew Voltaire," it corrected mildly. "And don't you get it, Gabrielle? I'm a permanent part of your life now. We'll be doing everything together. I'm *never* going away."

* * *

*The other day upon the stair, I saw a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today; how I wish he'd go away!*

The nonsensical rhyme looping madly through her brain was one she'd learned from Gram as a small child. She'd never thought that one day she'd be living it. Trapped in it. Forced to coexist with a being no one else could see but her.

But she was. And afraid that already half her coworkers thought she was nuts. Despite her efforts to ignore Adam Black, on too many occasions the fairy had provoked a response from her, and she'd not missed the funny looks other interns had been casting her way.

Midnight. She was in bed fully clothed, blankets snug to her

chin, clenched in tight little fists. Afraid to sleep, for fear she'd wake up and find it in bed with her. Or worse, not wake up in time. At least this way she figured it would have to undress her before it could make good on those heated, erotic glances it had been giving her all day, and surely that would jar her into wakefulness before it got too far.

It had dogged her steps the entire afternoon. Watched everything she did. (Well, almost everything. It'd been civil enough to stay out of the rest room when she'd turned around and bared her teeth at it before slamming the door in its face.) It had taunted, provoked, brushed its big, hard body against hers at every opportunity, and in general lounged about looking like the epically horny fairy it was reputed to be, dark and sinfully, shiver-inducingly sexual. She'd stayed at the office long after everyone else went home, until nine o'clock, trying to get a handle on her caseload, so tired and distracted that everything was taking her ten times as long as it should have.

And she might have stayed later had Adam Black not vanished, only to reappear with a sumptuous dinner pilfered from Jean-Robert at Pigall's, of all places. Of course it had exquisite taste in food. And why not, when it could steal everything it wanted? She'd like to wear the *féth fiada* herself, long enough for a few hours of madcap penalty-free shoplifting at Saks Fifth Avenue, maybe a mosey up to Tiffany's.

In silence, the tall, muscular, leather-clad Fae had spread a stolen linen on her desk, arranged her meal of roasted salmon braised with a heavenly-smelling sauce, a decadent cheesy-potato dish, a side of roasted vegetables, crusty bread with honey-butter, and no less than three desserts. It had produced, with a flourish, a single, velvety Stargazer in a tall, shimmering vase and poured wine into a delicate lead-crystal goblet.

"Eat, Gabrielle," it had said softly, moving to stand behind her, briefly resting its hands on her shoulders. Then one big hand had slipped up, cradling her skull, while the other had begun gently massaging the nape of her neck. For a treacherous moment, she'd nearly melted into the magic of those hands.

Plastering a fierce scowl on her lips, she'd tipped back her head to verbally lambaste it, to tell it precisely where it could stuff its stolen goods, but it had vanished again. She hadn't seen it since.

She knew now what it planned to do to her, and it was far crueler than force. It was going to be in her life every day, driving her crazy, provoking her, exhausting her. It was going to be, not cruel and brutal, but gentle and teasing and seductive, almost as if it somehow *knew* of her secret obsession with the Fae. And when she was in a weakened state, it would ply its seduction on her, hoping to subvert her to its aim.

No, it wouldn't use force; she should have seen that coming. Hadn't the *Book of the Sin Siriche Du* made it clear that the thing lived to seduce and manipulate? She supposed brute force was a thing an immortal, all-powerful fairy wearied of in a mere few centuries. She could just hear it saying. *Too easy, where's the fun in that?*

Force she could deal with: It would make her fight, rage, perhaps even die resisting it. Force would fuel her hatred of it and make her more stubborn.

But seduction from that sexy dark fairy?

She was in a world of trouble, and she knew it.

Sad thing was, it hadn't even had to look very far for a weakness to exploit. She liked nice things. She was rarely able to have

them, what with her meager income barely covering her most essential living expenses and tuition. She was just as much a sucker for good food, pretty flowers, and expensive wine as any other girl. Though she'd berated herself the entire time, she'd nonetheless eaten the fabulous meal after Adam Black had left, knowing she'd never be able to afford Jean-Robert at Pigall's on her own. After she'd finished the last succulent bite of chocolate-macadamia truffle tart smothered in whipped cream, she'd been so disgusted with herself that she'd given up and packed it in for the night.

And she had a dreadful suspicion that it was only getting wanned up.

The world is a vast adventure begging to be had, it had said as she'd sat in her gray cubicle surrounded by oodles of other gray cubicles in a gray office building, pushing paper, or rather, being pushed by paper that daily thieved more of her life; she rarely saw the sun anymore because it had yet to rise when she went in to work and had often set by the time she got home.

A vast adventure... Had she ever felt that way, excited by all the possibilities life might hold?

No. She'd always felt compelled, driven to be responsible. To get the best grades. To have a respectable career. To excel at said career. To be kind to small children and old people and animals. To do everything right. *You don't need to prove anything*, Gabby, Gram had chided her years ago. *You're perfect just the way you are*.

Right. That was why her mom had left. Because she was so perfect. If she'd been any more perfect. Gram might have left too.

With a grunt of exasperation. Gabby punched her pillow and rolled over. Her sweats got twisted, the underwire of her bra dug into her skin, and her shirt nicked up. One sock was annoyingly half-on and half-off, a disgustingly droopy feeling. She never slept in clothes and, despite the open windows and the rhythmic paddling of the ceiling fan, it was hot in her turret bedroom. Sweat was trickling down between her breasts and her hair was clinging damply to her neck.

"I'm going to *kill* you, Adam Black," she muttered tiredly, closing her eyes.

Then opened them again, wide, electrified by the thought.

It was in mortal form.

Holy cow.

It *could* be killed.

And wouldn't that just solve all her problems?

* * *

"I only want four of you," said Darroc, barely concealing his distaste. He didn't know why he ever bothered to hide it; the Unseelie Hunters were far too barbaric, too brutish, to care.

"A score of us will find him more swiftly, Darroc," said Bastion. The oldest and most powerful of the Hunters, he shifted his

leathery wings, glancing hungrily around at the lush, rolling fields.

Darroc watched Bastion's nostrils flaring at the scent of the human realm. He'd chosen to release the Hunter from his icy prison— that grim, hellish Fae realm to which the Unseelie had been condemned— and bring him to the Hill of Tara to remind him of all the Unseelie had lost. Also to ensure that the Unseelie King, who at times supported Aoibheal and at other times didn't (and none could ever predict when, not even her) did not overhear. Though the King of Darkness rarely emerged from his dark fortress in the bleakest of reaches within his realm of shadow and ice, Darroc had no desire to draw the notice of the formidable... creature.

"Haste is not the issue, stealth is. A score of you in the human realm is too risky, and our plans might never come to fruition. Seek you to roam the earth freely again, Hunter, as you did before The Compact?"

"You know I do," growled Bastion.

"Do as I say and it will come to pass. Disobey me and it will never happen."

"The Hunters obey no one." Dark wings rustled angrily.

"We *all* obey, Bastion, and have since The Compact was sealed," said Darroc, striving for patience. The Unseelie tried his patience at the best of times, and these were not. They were dangerous times, and he didn't need the danger compounded by rogue Hunters who refused to obey his commands. "A thing I'm trying to change. Will you follow my orders, or am I to assume you are content in your realm? Trapped. Stabled like lowly beasts."

Lips drawn back in a scowl, Bastion nodded once, tightly. "Very well. Four of us, no more. Have you any idea where he is?"

"Not yet. Aoibheal has forbidden his name to even be spoken at court, hence my spies have been able to tell me nothing. Go first to Scotland, the Highlands. He once sired a son there."

Unfortunately, Darroc knew little more than that. He had no idea if the child had even survived to maturity. Those Tuatha Dé Adam might count as friends had never been friends of Darroc's, and Aoibheal kept her own counsel where the prince she'd been so wont to indulge was concerned. If not for Mael, he'd have known nothing at all of Adam's fate. He— a bloody Elder of her High Council— kept in the dark. Still, a number of his race hadn't been seen for several mortal months, coinciding with a time shortly after Adam's banishment to the human realm. He had no doubt he would soon find one of his brethren who knew exactly where Adam was, if the Hunters didn't find him sooner.

"And when we find him?"

Darroc smiled. He could sense the Hunter's restlessness, his hunger for a return to old times and old ways. It mirrored his own. He felt every bit as caged on the Fae Isle of Morar as did the Hunters in their prison-realm. "You may kill him, *but*" — he placed a forceful hand on Bastion's arm— "you must make it appear an accident. As if he died of mortal causes. Removing Adam Black is only the first step in my plan, and the queen's suspicions must not yet be aroused. That means no hint of anything remotely Fae anywhere near his body. Human wounds only. Do you understand?"

"Yes"

"Can you make the other three understand and obey you?"

"I will choose well." Bastion shifted impatiently.

"Then, name your three, and I will bring them here," said Darroc.

Bastion's flame-colored eyes flashed as he called forth his Hunters.

8

Gabby awoke just before dawn. For one blissful moment her body was awake, but her mind was still muzzily cocooned by dreams, and she thought it was a day just like any other. Normal, peaceful, filled with trivial issues and manageable concerns.

Then, *wham-bam!* memories battered her: She'd blown the job interview, betrayed herself to a fairy, had a week's worth of work to do today, and her life was a living hell.

Groaning, she rolled over, trying desperately to fall back asleep so she wouldn't have to face it all yet.

No such luck.

Adam Black was in the shower.

She could hear him, er— *it*— splashing around in there.

A mere dozen paces down the hall from her bedroom. A tall, dark, sexy, and *very* naked fairy. Right here in her house. In her shower. Using her soap and towels.

And it was singing. Sexy voice, too, with that strange, husky Celtic accent. Nothing less than an old Sophie B. Hawkins song: *Damn I wish I was your lover, I'd rock you 'til the daylight comes...*

I just bet you would, a teenage voice sighed dreamily inside her mind.

* * *

"I need a gun," Gabby whispered.

"I need a gun." Gabby told Jay as she stepped into her cubicle.

Placing her cup of coffee on her desk, she tucked her purse in a drawer, dropped into the chair, smoothed her skirt over her hips, then spun about, facing the aisle. "Where does a person buy a gun, Jay?"

Jay Landry, co-intern and inhabitant of the cube catty-corner to hers, slowly spun his chair around and glanced at her searchingly. "Gabby, are you feeling all right? Jeff said you were sick. Are you sure you're better? You've been acting funny."

"I'm fine," she said, legs crossed, one foot briskly tapping air. "I just wondered where a person might buy a gun."

"What do you want it for?" he hedged.

"I don't feel safe living where I live," she lied baldly. It wasn't as if she could possibly get caught and tried for what she was planning to do, she reassured herself. In order to establish murder, one had to have not only a weapon but a body. And since nobody but her could actually *see* the body-to-be, *voilà*—

no crime. Besides, it was self-defense, through and through.

"Take a karate course."

She rolled her eyes. "And what do I do for the next however-many-years it takes before I manage to become remotely proficient at that?"

He shrugged "Make your boyfriend move in."

"I don't *have* a boyfriend anymore," she said peevishly.

He didn't look at all surprised "Probably because you work so much, Gabby. I bet he got sick of you being married to your job. I would. You know"— he glanced around and cautiously lowered his voice— "Jeff wouldn't push you around so much if he didn't know you'd take it. He knows you'll spend the whole weekend researching the Rollins case. He knows you'll bust butt trying to prove yourself. And what's *he* planning to do this weekend, you ask? I'll tell you. I overheard him making plans this morning to meet some buddies and spend the weekend golfing at Hilton Head. He'll be out catching some rays, drinking some beer. While you sit here in your— "

"All right, already," Gabby bristled, temper spiking. But first things first: one dastardly fairy out of the way, *then* she'd deal with Jeff Staller and his sneaky little golfing plans. "This is not about me, or my ex-boyfriend, or our boss. This is only about where I can get a gun."

"You're scaring me. And I'm not telling you." Jay turned back around, nose to his computer screen.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I'll just look in the phone book if you won't help me."

"Fine. Then I can't be implicated as any sort of accomplice."

Law students could be *such* sticks-in-the-mud about potential liability issues, Gabby thought, sniffing, as she turned back around to her desk.

And gritted her teeth. Adam Black was perched on the low, half-wall of her cubicle, clad in leather pants again— these a deep charcoal and positively buttery-soft-looking, and her gaze got stuck on them for a moment— white T-shirt stretched across his massive chest, and yet another pair of expensive-looking slate-gray suede boots. He was holding the Yellow Pages in one big hand. His black hair spilled in a shimmering fall of silk to his waist, with a plait swinging at each temple. Merely looking at him made her mouth go dry, her palms sweaty. Made every hormone in her body leap to quivering, delighted attention.

"Is it to be war between us, then, *ka-lyrra*?" he said softly.

Snatching the phone book from his hand, she hissed, "It already is. It has been since the moment you invaded my life."

"What?" Jay said behind her.

"Nothing," she tossed over her shoulder.

"It doesn't have to be, Irish. Things could be good between us." Hand still outstretched, he captured a silky fall of her hair, sliding it between his fingers. His eyes narrowed, darkening with desire. "I like your hair down. You should wear it this way more often. Masses of silky stuff for a man to bury his hands in." He made a soft purring noise deep in his throat that was so erotic it made her nipples tighten. Dropping from his perch atop the half-wall, he sat back on the edge of her desk, facing her, legs splayed on either side of her chair. It put her at eye

level with his groin, with a heavy swollen leather-clad bulge that simply could not be missed.

Jerking her gaze to his face, she hissed. "You're not a man, you're a *thing*."

Oh, *who* was she trying to convince?

It just wasn't humanly possible for a woman to look at Adam Black and call him an "it." It was wearing her out, trying to. Diverting her attention from larger issues, like figuring out how to get rid of him. *Give it up, O'Callaghan*, she told herself, exasperated. *It's hardly worth the effort, considering how consistently you're failing. Devote the effort to better causes. Causes you might succeed at.*

"And it's only down," she continued frostily, not about to miss an opportunity to air her backed-up grievances; it had been *such* a sucky morning, "because you were hogging the upstairs bathroom, and I couldn't get my hair dryer or any of my clips. I couldn't even get my toothbrush. And you ran me out of hot water." She'd showered downstairs (hastily and with the door locked— as if that were much of a barrier against a being that could "sift place"— still, it had given her an illusion of security, and Gabby was willing to settle for illusion, being that her reality was so depressing) in water that had raised chill bumps all over her skin. Then she'd tugged on panty hose and a suit, reluctantly skipped breakfast, and dashed out, determined to avoid him for as long as possible.

"Gabby?" Jay's voice, sounding genuinely worried.

Without looking back, Gabby snapped. "I'm on the phone, Jay; I have my headset on."

"Oh. Sorry." Relief evident in his voice.

"Truly, Irish, I vow you lie more than— and nearly as smoothly as— I. And plotting murder? It gives me pause, makes me wonder just what kind of nefarious human I've gotten myself mixed up with."

"Oooh, how dare you act like *I'm* the— "

But she didn't get to unload even the teeniest piece of her mind, for the infernal fairy had vanished again.

Bristling, she tossed the Yellow Pages aside (not much point in buying a gun now that he was forewarned; besides, she doubted she had the stomach to point a gun at something that looked so human and pull the trigger, not to mention having to dispose of the body. Though no one else could see it, she could hardly leave its body lying about in her house or office— *ew*) and pulled out the Desny case. She might as well get as much work done as possible, because she knew Adam Black would be back.

Must be nice, she seethed, to just be able to "pop out" whenever you didn't feel like continuing a conversation. She knew a lot of men who'd give their right arms for *that* unique talent.

Flipping on her computer, she mentally filed murder away as a last-resort option. If things got really bad, she'd force herself to find the stomach to do what she had to do. (That she didn't already consider things "really bad" should have set off more than a few alarms, but her mind had moved on to other concerns.)

Opening the file, she prepared to refresh herself with the case. And froze, blinking down at fully completed contentions. Had she finished them last night and just been so tired she'd

forgotten?

No way. She wasn't that good when she was tired. She peered. It wasn't even her handwriting. She had terrible penmanship, and this was beautiful script, striking, bold, flowing.

Arrogant, actually, if penmanship could be called that. Nothing indecisive about this slanted, self-assured script. Frowning, she began to read.

A few minutes later, she was still reading, muttering "I don't *freaking* believe it" beneath her breath.

* * *

It figured that when she actually wanted to see him, he left her alone. He stayed away most of the day. Making her wonder what dastardly deeds he was up to. The office was empty again by the time he appeared around seven-thirty, right behind her, so close he was practically on top of her, carrying bags from—*oh, God, no*— she briefly closed her eyes, *please no*.

The Maisonette. Five-star dining, no less.

But Gabby had prepared herself this time. She'd snacked on candy throughout the entire day (no hardship there), just to make sure she wouldn't be hungry and tempted by anything he might offer.

Still, the Maisonette? Grr. She shook her head brusquely and refused to even look at the bags, refused to wonder what scrumptious stolen delicacies lurked therein.

She moved hastily away from him. When he deposited the bags on her desk, she grabbed a thick, rubber-banded accordion file and threw it at him, hitting him smack in the chest. "How?" she demanded.

"How what, *ka-lyrra*?" Catching the file, he placed it gently on her desk.

"How did you do my work? *When* did you do my work?"

He shrugged, one powerful shoulder rippling. "I don't need as much sleep as you."

"So you're telling me that in a few hours last night you personally wrote the contentions for *seven* of my cases?"

"Nine. Then I realized two of them weren't yours, so I discarded them."

"How do you know enough about what I do to even argue liability?"

"Oh, please." He sounded highly insulted. "I've been alive for thousands of years and watching humans for most of it. I read a few of your other cases. It was easy to pattern them appropriately. Human law is simple: You blame anything but yourselves. I merely accused everyone and everything mentioned in the file but for the person you were representing, and backed it up with whatever evidence I could twist to support my allegations."

Gabby tried not to laugh. She did. Tried hard. But he'd gotten

his subtle little dig in with such a perfectly bland expression, and had so thoroughly summed up what she hated about handling personal injury cases, after only a few hours of working on them, that she couldn't help it. A little snort escaped her. And it turned into a laugh. And she might have continued laughing except a slow smile curved his lips and his dark eyes glittered. He stalked toward her, caught her by the waist with his big hands, and stared down at her.

"This is the first time I've seen you laugh. Gabrielle. You're even more beautiful when you laugh. I hadn't thought it possible."

Her laughter died abruptly and she jerked away from him. But it was too late, his hands had already left their fiery imprint on her body, like a heated, erotic brand. "Don't flatter me. Don't be nice to me," she gritted. "And do *not* do any more of my work for me."

"I was merely trying to help. You looked so weary last night."

"As if you care. Stay out of my life."

"I can't do that."

"Because I refuse to sacrifice my whole world just to help you regain yours," she snapped bitterly.

"No," he said evenly, eyes narrowing "Because I don't like your boss. I don't like the way he looks at you. I don't like the way he treats you. I don't bloody like a bloody frigging thing about the prick. And when I'm myself again. I will rectify the situation."

Gabby went still. Adam Black looked and sounded angry. Genuinely angry. About how she was being treated. His face was dark and thunderous, his eyes snapping with golden sparks.

Oh, that was deadly. That was cruel. Acting like he had feelings. Like he gave a damn. Especially when she really didn't have anybody else in her life that did. Clearly he would do anything in order to seduce her to his aim— even mimic emotion and pretend concern. After all, wasn't that why it was called seduction? Because the victim was lulled into a feeling of false safety and well-being? And how could that be engendered except through the pretense of caring?

No soul. No heart. Ergo, no emotions, she reminded herself.

Snatching up her purse, she flipped off her computer and stomped out of her cubicle.

* * *

They'd even been really *good* contentions, she was still brooding irritably, an hour and a half later, as she dumped the laundry basket on her bed and began sorting her clothes into loads. Immersing herself in routine helped her pretend the *sin siriche du* himself wasn't currently downstairs in her kitchen, drinking single-malt scotch straight from the bottle (fifty-year-old Macallan, no less) and typing away on her laptop, surfing the Net.

By the time she'd gotten home, he'd already been there, with the stage lavishly set for his next seduction. Five-star dinner spread out on her dining room table, a vase of long-stemmed roses

perfuming the air, drapes drawn and candles lit. Fine crystal sparkled on the table, crystal she *knew* she didn't own. Silverware she'd never seen before, fine china too.

She'd tipped her nose skyward and started to stalk past him toward the stairs. He'd moved into her path, brushing his body against her. Then caught her by one arm.

He'd turned her to face him and just stared down at her in silence for the longest time before finally releasing her. She'd said nothing, not about to give an inch. Not even when he'd dropped his dark chiseled face forward until his lips had been a mere breath from hers, using his blatant masculinity in an attempt to cow her. Stoically resisting the overpowering temptation to wet her lips in a timeless invitation, she'd stood her ground, levelly meeting that dark gaze, refusing to believe that there might be anything other than cold-blooded calculation in his eyes. And if, for a moment, she'd thought she'd seen a hint of humanity, of male frustration, of genuine desire, of tempered impatience in their gold-sparked depths, it had been a trick of the flickering candlelight.

Nothing more.

His legal briefs had been better than anything she'd ever written. Brilliant, charismatically persuasive, incisive. She had no doubt she'd win every arbitration he'd written. She'd been envious reading them, wishing she'd thought of that argument or seen that subtle, keen twist. Two of the cases he'd argued were ones where she *knew* the person she was representing bore negligence in excess of fifty-one percent (they were being filed because they were "friends of friends," and her smarmy boss owed a few people favors— probably in exchange for golf privileges at some fancy club), yet after reading Adam's

argument, even *she* would have decided in favor of her guilty client.

He was that good.

I've been alive for thousands of years, he'd said. She shivered. Ancient Adam Black was ancient. And had probably done everything there was to do, at least once. Why should it surprise her that he could do her job so well? He was a being that could travel through time and space. Maybe he had no soul and no heart, but there had to be a pretty damned formidable intellect behind those dark, shimmering, intensely alive eyes.

She sorted her wash automatically, hands moving, brain whirring away. Whites. Lights. Darks. Darks. Darks. Lights. Darks. Whites— wait!

His *T-shirt*?

He'd actually had the gall to toss his dirty shirt in her laundry basket? Wadding it up in her fist, she turned around to go tell him exactly what he could do with his dirty clothes. Then stopped.

Then started again. Then stopped.

Nibbling her lip. she had a brief and very heated argument with herself.

With an exasperated sigh, she raised his shirt to her nose and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes.

Could a man smell any more like sin?

Hint of jasmine and sandalwood and a spray of night surf. Scent of darkness and spice and sex. Forbidden things, unholy things, things that prayers were meant to cover in that part about

deliver us from temptation and protect us from all evil.

He was never setting his T-shirt back.

* * *

Much later, after Gabby had gone to bed, Adam ducked his head inside her turret bedroom. She was sleeping soundly. Good. The petite *ka-lyrra* worked too hard. Permitted others to push their responsibilities off on her. He would put an end to that. Life was short enough for a mortal. They shouldn't work so much. Play more. He would teach her to play. Once he was again immortal, she would never work, want for nothing.

All the windows were open and a fragrant night breeze was blowing in, rippling across the thin sheet beneath which she slept. Moonlight spilled across the bed, casting her long hair spun-silver, her slumbering features warm pearl.

Fully clothed, he noticed, with a sardonic smile. Wise woman. If she'd been foolish enough to sleep nude, he'd not have contented himself with the minor mission for which he'd come. The mere thought of her nude beneath that sheet... ah, he was sexually obsessed with her. With her full, round breasts, the endless temptation of her soft, womanly ass, her lush carnal lips, her hair, her eyes, her hands. Her fire.

Even her virginity turned him on. Filled him with a primal possessiveness, knowing he would be the first man to push

himself inside her, to fill her up, to touch her in all those dark, heated, intimate ways. He would seduce her so thoroughly that she would no longer be able to conceive of herself apart from him; she would be his for the taking, anytime he wanted, anywhere, and in any way he chose to take her, able to deny him nothing.

He knew she'd expected force from him. He'd seen it in her eyes when she was tied to her chair yesterday, so defiantly telling him "no".

How little she understood of what he had planned for her.

Yesterday morning, after she'd gone in to work (which hadn't surprised him; his tenacious *Sidhe-seer* would no more relinquish control of her world than he willingly would of his), he'd thoroughly acquainted himself with her home, learned everything about her he could. He'd examined what kind of books she liked to read, what kind of clothing she wore, what lingerie got the bliss of cupping her breasts and slipping between the curves of her bottom, what soap and scents caressed her silken skin. He'd examined photographs, opened her luggage, and studied what things she'd deemed too precious to leave behind when she'd packed to run. And each discovery had made him want her all the more; she was shiny and bright and ripe with mortal hopes and dreams.

The *Books of the Fae* had been a laugh. Well, except for the volume that so grievously maligned him. But he'd been rectifying that.

The slender tome had made him out to be the foulest of the Fae. It had portrayed him as a consummate liar, a trickster and deceiver, a cold-blooded, arrogant seducer who cared for nothing but his pleasure in the moment.

It was no wonder she'd fought him so fiercely, no wonder she'd so swiftly dismissed his word. The Devil himself hadn't fared worse in literary history.

Still, he could do without words; he would speak to his *Sidhe-seer* through his actions— select, carefully chosen ones. He'd learned long ago that it was the tiniest of details that seduced, the most delicate of touches that brought the mightiest to their knees.

Christ, he thought, staring down at her, she had to be hot in all those clothes. Her house was overly warm, even on the first floor where he'd been working online. Another thing he would do something about for her.

He'd had no luck finding anything about Circenn's whereabouts in any of those databases humans were so fond of compiling, but he'd not truly expected to. His half-Fae son could be not only anywhere but *anywhen*. It was entirely possible he'd taken his wife and children back to the Highlands, to his own century and a simpler way of life, where he might stay indefinitely.

But no matter. Circenn would show up eventually.

And the day had been productive in other ways; he'd planted many seeds that were already taking root. Not the least of which was a simple shirt.

She'd done her laundry tonight, he'd heard her.

But there'd been no explosion. No shouting, no insistence that it would be a cold day in hell before she washed his clothes. Not that he'd intended her to. He discarded clothing once he wore it and took new.

Stepping deeper into her room, he silently slid open a dresser

drawer. Then another. And another. Until there it was. His T-shirt. Neatly folded in her bottom drawer, hidden beneath a pair of sweats.

A smile curved his lips.

He closed the drawer and walked over to her closet, opened it, and glanced down at her laundry basket. As he'd thought, she'd not washed what she'd been wearing today. A pair of panties disappeared into his pocket. "Quid pro quo, *ka-lyrra*," he murmured softly. "You get a piece of me; I get a piece of you."

He shut the closet door and stared down at her again. His body was strung tight with lust so intense that the mere wanting of her was a thing to savor. All his senses were inflamed, and he was suddenly feeling things that, if ever he'd once felt, he'd long ago forgotten.

By Danu, he thought, inhaling sharply, he felt *alive*. Vibrantly, acutely, perhaps one might say... passionately alive. The simplest of experiences were suddenly so savory, so rich in nuance and complexity. Merely choosing his clothing each morning at Saks held new-fascination for him, as he selected them with an eye toward her reaction, learning what she liked to see on him. What made her eyes widen, her pupils dilate, her lips part just a bit.

Leather. She definitely liked leather.

He knew what he would see on her, once he'd smoothed that bristly spine of hers.

Nothing.

Her nipples hard and wet, glistening from his tongue. Her bare ass cupped in his hands as he raised her to his mouth. That

same ass flipped over and raised for—

A low growl built in his throat. Clenching his teeth, he forced himself to step away from her bed. Not yet.

She would soon come to understand that he was not what she thought of him. That there was much more to Adam Black than the bloody, blasphemous, idiotic *Book of the Sin Siriche Du* downstairs alleged. He'd spent several hours today rewriting it, crossing out entire sections, simply ripping out other pages and inseting new ones.

It occurred to him as he slipped from her room that, supposing Circenn never came back, seducing Gabrielle O'Callaghan might not be a half-bad way to pass a mortal life.

At least until Aoibheal returned for him and made him immortal again.

Before he left, he turned off her alarm clock. He had no intention of letting her go to work tomorrow.

9

"Stay away! Don't touch me!"

Gabby woke hard, in a full panic, scrambling up and back, plastering herself against the headboard of her bed, eyes wild.

Adam stood a few feet away, one dark brow arched, a tray balanced on one hand. "Easy, *ka-lyrra*, I but brought you breakfast. I was about to put it on the edge of your bed and shake you awake."

Gabby pressed a hand to her chest, trying to slow the pounding of her heart. "You scared me! Don't sneak up on me like that. What are you doing in my bedroom? Get out of my bedroom."

"I didn't 'sneak.' I said 'good morning' three times. Louder each time. I practically bellowed it at the last. You sleep like the dead, Irish. Be easy. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going to hurt you? If I'd wanted to, I would have done my worst by now." He placed the tray on the edge of the bed and picked up a cup, offering it to her. "Double-shot espresso. I've noticed you like to kick yourself awake in the morning." He smiled lazily. Sexily.

Gabby blinked slowly. Life was so not fair. Her heart had begun to slow but was now speeding back up all over again, for entirely different reasons.

There Adam Black stood, nearly six and a half feet of sleek hard body, wearing nothing but a pair of faded jeans slung low on his hips, gold armbands, and a torque. The jeans lent him the air of a modern man, but the arm cuffs and neckpiece, coupled with his strange dual-colored eyes, reminded her that he was a being whose origins predated Christ. Probably by thousands of years. He probably even predated Newgrange. For that matter, maybe he'd built it.

And, oh, but he took her breath away. His wide shoulders and hard chest were sinfully sculpted, his abs rippled and lean. He had those twin ropes of muscle ripping the sides of a six-pack that led straight down to his groin, disappearing into those low-slung jeans, advertising the fact that he could no doubt move said groin for hours without stopping and in ways that could make a woman whimper in ecstasy.

And all of it was covered with that luscious gold-velvet fairy skin. She curled her hands into little fists, battling the overwhelming impulse to cop that eternally denied fairy-feel.

Knowing that he would let her pet him, that in fact he would strip off those jeans in a heartbeat and stretch that hard body over hers and drive into her, made it all the more difficult. With immense effort, she dragged her gaze up to his face.

But looking at his face was no better. His hair was a fall of sleep-tangled midnight silk, his eyes were half-awake, sensually hooded. His face was unshaven, dusted with black stubble; he was a beautiful, rough-around-the-edges, early-morning-sexed man.

"Exactly how old *are* you?" she asked grumpily, trying to put him back into the perspective of an inhuman being. He looked about thirty, with tiny faint laugh lines at the corners of his eyes.

He shrugged "Somewhere between five and six thousand. It's a bit difficult to keep track of when one moves about in time as frequently as I have. Aoibheal is nearly sixty thousand. I am a mere child by my race's standards."

"I see." *Whuh*. Definitely inhuman. Unfortunately, discovering his age didn't seem to have diminished her attraction to him in the least. In fact, it seemed somehow, perversely, to have heightened it.

He waved a hand at the breakfast tray. "A croissant perhaps? No? How about some fruit?" He proffered a bowl of freshly cut strawberries, mangoes, and kiwi. "Aren't you hungry? I wake up starved." He sounded mildly offended by the fact.

Oh, she was hungry, all right. Unfortunately, the only thing in her bedroom that she wanted to eat was him.

Suddenly she was fourteen again. And there he was, her fantasy fairy, in her bedroom, no less, saving her breakfast in bed. Her gaze fixed on his gold torque and she had to know. "*What* are you. anyway?" she demanded irritably.

He cocked his head. "I'm a Tuatha Dé Danaan." Dark brows drew together in a frown. "You know that."

"I meant." she clarified peevishly, "your torque."

"Ah." Those slanted brows relaxed. "I'm the last prince of the *D'Jai* House."

"*P-p-p-prince?*" she sputtered.

"Yes." His eyes narrowed. "Problem with that?"

She didn't trust herself to speak.

"I'm not elitist, if that's what concerns you. I bed commoners all the time." A faint, provocative grin.

"I just bet you do," she muttered. "But not this one."

"Not yet," he agreed, far too mildly for her comfort.

"And I'm not a commoner. We don't have those kinds of class divisions anymore."

"Actually," he agreed with her, "that's true. You're *not* a commoner." He dropped onto the foot of her bed and tucked one leg under the other, sitting cross-legged.

"What do you mean?" she asked warily, watching him carefully. Braced for him to try something. But he made no move toward her, just sat there perfectly at ease on the end of her dainty bed in her frilly, feminine bedroom: a big dark giant of a man, surrounded by lacy pillows and silky embroidered throws, and all the girly-stuff just made him look that much more masculine.

"Drink your coffee and I'll tell you," he bribed.

An awful suspicion occurred to her. "Why do you care if I drink it? Is it drugged or something?"

He rolled his eyes, picked up the cup, took several sips, then handed it back to her. "Of course not, Irish. I merely want your day to start well. I want you to be happy."

"Yeah, right." But the aroma of fresh-ground coffee teased her nostrils, and something deep inside her sighed hugely and capitulated without further argument. She took the cup and sipped. Heavenly. Hot and dark and sweet, just the way she liked it. He'd even gotten the amount of sugar right. When he

glanced away for a moment, out the window, she turned the cup to where he'd sipped, and closed her mouth on the rim.

Coffee in bed— when had anyone ever brought her that? Never, that's when. And exactly the way she liked it, with exactly what she usually had for breakfast. A croissant and fruit, so she could justify all the candy she tended to snack on the rest of the day, not to mention her weakness for cheese-smothered french fries. And Skyline coneys. And everything else that went straight to her hips. But so long as she had her healthy meal first thing in the morning each day, she felt good about herself for the rest of it.

"Okay, so how am I not a commoner?" He'd piqued her curiosity. Here was a man, er, fairy, who knew more about history than any living person, and from firsthand experience. What might he be able to tell her about her ancestors?

"You're a *Sidhe-seer*: In days long gone, in ancient Ireland, thousands of years before the birth of your Christ, they were prized among humans and treated as royalty, for they alone could protect the people from the Unseen. The mightiest warriors in all the lands competed in tournaments for the privilege of a *Sidhe-seer's* hand in marriage. Many a man died trying to win such a maiden. She answered to no one, not even human kings, so highly was she regarded. A *Sidhe-seer* lived in the finest of comfort and, in exchange for her protection, was protected and cared for by her people all the days of her life."

Wow, Gabby thought, what a far cry from her life. She— who had such a hard time keeping a boyfriend— would have once been fought over by warriors. She wouldn't have been considered a freak but would have been valued for her curse. Rather than being ridiculed or carted off to a loony bin if

someone found out, she would have been respected, born to a family whose fortunes would have been bettered by having her. Born to a mother who would have been proud.

"Even now you continue the tradition," he said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"The *Sidhe-seers* were also *brehons*: lawgivers to their people. Though human law-has become a very strange thing indeed, it is what you chose as your life's work. Blood will tell."

Gabby was silent a moment, sipping her coffee and looking at him over the rim of it.

He's getting to you. O'Callaghan, a faint inner voice warned.

No he's not, she retorted silently. *What harm is there in having coffee and talking about history with him?* She hadn't had anybody to talk to about fairy-things since Gram died. Four years was a long time. She hadn't realized how much she missed it.

This is how he's seducing you.

Hardly. He hasn't even tried to kiss me again. She was almost beginning to wonder why not. How long since he'd exploded through her door— two days? Three? Four? Heavens, she was beginning to lose track of time.

But he's doing it all deliberately, to slip past—

Gabby shook her head sharply, terminating the paranoid voice. Her defenses were fine. Ramrod straight and fully erected. She was in control. Caffeine was beginning to hum through her veins, soothing her nicely. It was cozy to sit tucked in bed and talk. "Tell me more about my ancestors," she said, reaching for

the croissant.

* * *

Gabby stood under the shower feeling deliriously relaxed. She'd hit it first this morning and planned to use every last drop of hot water herself. She lathered, exfoliated, and shaved, until her skin felt silky smooth and eminently touchable (not that she was planning to let anyone touch it or anything).

It was Saturday, and though she usually worked a full day on Saturdays, she'd decided not to go in. Not because of him; it had nothing to do with Adam Black. She'd just realized she was long overdue to send a message to her boss. It was time she made it clear that she was not his personal slave and was not going to sacrifice her weekends for him.

Hence the Rollins research wasn't going to get done. And if he had a problem with that, he could fire her. She knew he wouldn't. Interns were slave labor, they came cheap. And although she wasn't as brilliantly persuasive as a fairy that was thousands of years old, she still managed to win a sweet eighty-two percent of the arbitrations she filed. No, he wouldn't fire her.

A *brehon*, she thought, lathering shampoo in her hair. Adam had told her much about old Irish law; regaled her with tale after tale about his experiences with, and knowledge of, the

ancient Celts. She almost felt as if she'd spent the morning slipped back in another time.

He was, she grudgingly admitted, fascinating. Possessing a dry, often dark sense of humor, he was a veritable font of information about virtually anything and everything.

Perhaps, she mused, eyes narrowing pensively, if she spent more time with him, coaxed him to tell her more about himself, she'd find a weakness she could exploit, a vulnerability she could turn to her advantage.

The more time you spend with him, the more chance you give him to seduce you.

Yeah, well, she really couldn't see any other options. He'd moved in. The blackest fairy was playing house with her, and she was pretty sure he wouldn't be leaving anytime soon, unless she could find some way to make him leave.

Keep your friends close, Gabby, Gram had always said, but your enemies closer still.

* * *

"So, what did you do that got you into so much trouble with your queen?" Gabby embarked on her new plan without preamble as she entered the kitchen. He was standing at the sink, eating leftovers from the Maisonette.

Adam swallowed the last bite of cold filet mignon and shrugged. Christ, this having to eat five, six, even seven times a day to keep his body running at peak efficiency was absurdly time-consuming. Still, it was pleasurable, the feeling of hunger, and the sating of it. Taste was every bit as heightened in human form as lust was. In fact, all human sensations were more intense than a Tuatha Dé's. It hardly seemed fair. There were some things about being human that he was going to miss when he was immortal again. "Irrelevant, *ka-lyrra*," he evaded.

Of all the things she might have asked, that was the one thing he didn't want to talk about. Even after all these months, he still wasn't sure why he'd done what he'd done. He'd known Aoibheal would have to punish him. He'd known this would push her too far. He'd known that defying her, questioning her authority in front of her entire court and the High Council, would force her to call him to account in ways more severe than she'd ever done before.

And still he'd done it.

There'd been no reason for him to. Dageus MacKeltar had clearly defied his most sacred trust and deserved to be punished. He'd broken The Compact between their races by using the time-traveling power of Scotland's standing stones for personal reasons— to save his twin brother's life— an action punishable by any means the queen so chose.

And she'd chosen, at the demand of her High Council, to subject him to trial by blood, which meant the Hunters would be sent to kill those closest to him, and if he used even the slightest amount of forbidden magic to save them, the Hunters would carry out a systematic destruction of the Keltar clan from the sixteenth century forward.

Long had the MacKeltar preserved the peace between their races, upholding The Compact and performing the feast rituals on Iinbolc, Beltane, Lughnassadh, and Samhain that kept the walls between Man and Fae realms intact. Now they were to be destroyed for breaching the ancient treaty.

And something inside Adam had reared its asinine head and opened his mouth, and the next thing he knew he'd been bargaining for the mortal's life *at any cost*. Irreverently, flippantly, wagering it all.

He'd been spying on the MacKeltar clan for millennia; the queen's edict forbidding any Tuatha Dé to go within one thousand leagues of MacKeltar land in the lush Highlands of Scotland had only tempted him all the more (and as ever, she'd granted him leeway; she'd not liked it, but she'd tolerated it).

He'd watched the petite, brilliant physicist Gwen Cassidy on her journey through time as she'd fallen in love with Drustan MacKeltar. He'd spied upon sensual, eclectic, and not-quite-ethical-when-it-came-to-artifacts Chloe Zanders as she'd lost her heart to Dageus, despite the younger MacKeltar twin being possessed by the evil souls of thirteen dark Druids at the time.

And the thought of watching them all die had filled him with a dark restlessness akin to one he'd not felt since the ninth century.

Name your price, he'd coolly told Aoibheal.

And then, when Dageus MacKeltar had lain dying, she'd named it. And Adam had placed his hands on the mortal's heart and given of his immortal essence to restore him to life. He'd thought that the temporary sapping of his immortal strength and power, which would have left him weak for centuries, was

to be his price, but she'd taken it even further and made him human, powerless, and cursed.

"So what makes you so sure she'll just forgive you?" Gabby asked, jarring him from his thoughts.

He shrugged again. "She always does. Besides, she wouldn't be able to stand eternity without me."

She snorted and shook her head. "Oh, I see. I keep forgetting how irresistible you are."

"No you don't," he said easily, flashing her a grin. "I see the way you look at me."

"What I don't understand," she pressed hastily on, cheeks pinkening faintly, "is why you don't just talk to one of the other fairies hanging around. The *féth fiada* doesn't work on them, does it? Or don't they want to help you either?"

For a moment Adam was so astonished that he thought he mustn't have heard her correctly. "What— other— fairies— hanging— around?" he enunciated each word tightly. Surely Aoibheal hadn't taken that from him, too, had she? Made him no longer able to even perceive his own kind? The *féth fiada* alone wouldn't have done that to him. It rendered its wearer invisible, but it didn't render anything else invisible to the wearer.

They're not your own kind anymore, an inner voice reminded. You're human. They're Tuatha Dé, and humans— except for the Sidhe-seers— can't see the Fae.

Bloody hell, he could be so stupid sometimes! He'd thought the reason he'd not seen any others of his kind was because she'd forbidden them to spy on him. But no, it was because she'd

made him human through and through.

They'd been watching him all along, no doubt endlessly amused by his humiliation. "I said. 'what other fairies?' " he gritted.

Gabby blinked at his tone. "All of them. Any of them. There are oodles— " She broke off abruptly. "Oh, God, you didn't know, did you?"

"How many Tuatha Dé are in this city besides me?" he growled.

She took a step back. "Well, really just a few, hardly even half a dozen, maybe not even that many, and actually, come to think of it. I haven't seen any at all in over a week, which makes sense because one of them said a while back that they were all planning to leave— "

His hand shot out and closed on her upper arm. "Don't lie to me, *Sidhe-seer*."

"I refuse," Gabby snapped. "I will not, I repeat— *abso-freaking-lutely-will-not*— talk to one of them for you. Hell will freeze over first. We're not even talking about half-Fae like this Circenn person you wanted me to talk to, these are the real deal, fairies with the power to summon Hunters. Iridescent-eyed, soulless, deadly fairies."

His smile was chilling. She'd just *had* to throw in that "soulless" bit. What was it with women and their hang-up about souls, anyway? Couldn't they find something else to obsess about? Like the phenomenal sex he could give them, the money, the fame, the complete fulfillment of their every desire, anything they wanted. But no, it was all souls, souls, souls. "Fine. Refuse. I'll simply walk around talking to you in public places until one of them figures out you can see me. How many did you say are

just 'hanging around'? 'Oodles,' was it? On every street corner perhaps? How long do you think it will take for me to smoke you out? A day? Two? A week? The way I see it, you have two choices: agree to help me and secure my protection— and I vow that I will do my utmost to keep you safe— or refuse and be revealed to *all* the Fae. And if you choose that, I won't lift a bloody finger to help you, Gabrielle. So choose well."

"You won't do that. You need me! You— "

"I will go find another *Sidhe-seer*: I've no doubt there are a few others still around," he snarled. He knew he was no longer seducing, was fully into the forcing arena, but fury had the same effect on his body as lust; it made him primitive. He would not be mocked by his own kind, spied on and humiliated by his own race. And with her "soulless" jibe still ringing in his ears, he was no longer in the mood to play the charming seducer. She thought he was black? She hadn't even seen pale gray. In fact, she'd seen nothing but lily-white Adam Black so far.

Besides, it was only a matter of time before she was discovered anyway. They'd come to spy on him, to watch him be human and humbled, and he was surprised they hadn't noticed her already. They must be keeping a bit of a distance, perhaps uncertain how long the queen intended to sustain his punishment, and wary of being too close, in case he suddenly regained his power. As they should be, he thought viciously. "So?" he demanded. "What will it be, Irish?"

"I need to think." she said tightly.

"You have one hour."

10

Well that had to be the shortest-lived plan in history, Gabby thought peevishly, as she paced back and forth across her bedroom, periodically glancing at the clock that was devouring her precious minutes tick by greedy tock.

Right— she was going to learn about him, lure him into revealing a weakness. A whopping two questions into her dazzlingly expert interrogation, thrown off-kilter by his comment about the way she looked at him, she'd blurted the first thing that had popped into her mind, only belatedly realizing that he hadn't known. Hadn't had any clue that the city was thick with other fairies. She'd just assumed that he was either too proud to ask them for aid, or they'd already refused to help him. Never had it occurred to her that he couldn't even see them.

She just kept digging herself in deeper.

And he was right. It wouldn't take long, as he'd threatened, for him to smoke her out. Merely being spotted walking down the street with him would give her away to any watching Fae.

She could either willingly help him, hoping he'd truly protect her (and that he could somehow save her from the formidable Aoibheal), or refuse and be abandoned to other Fae, who she knew wouldn't lift so much as a smugly superior finger to help

her. At least this way she had the hope of getting a fairy indebted to her, if that counted for anything among fairies.

Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know was another of Gram's favorite adages.

"Barely." she muttered.

Puffing her bangs from her eyes with a frustrated breath, she pivoted and paced to the window. Propping her elbows on the sill, she stared blindly out, eyes narrowed, thinking hard.

He'd been furious. Up until now, every seeming emotion he'd displayed since she'd first encountered him, she'd instantly discounted as mimicry, mere trickery, part of his calculated seduction.

But what she'd just seen had looked all too real. Intense, deeply felt, and genuine.

She'd seen not just anger, but wounded pride, and something else, something deeper that had seemed to flash involuntarily through his eyes when she'd made her comment about "iridescent-eyed, soulless, deadly fairies."

Was it possible, she wondered, bemused by the notion, that since he was in a human body he was actually experiencing human emotion? That all the emotions she'd thought she'd seen had been real not faked?

She had no idea what was possible and not possible when a fairy was in human form. She'd never stumbled across anything like this in the O'Callaghan *Books*. And— she glanced at the clock again— she highly doubted he'd give her any extra time to do some searching.

She could only pray that he was feeling, and feeling enough to make him keep his word to protect her, because, unfortunately, her back was to a wall.

Like it or not— and she didn't— she was going to have to help Adam Black.

* * *

"Okay, I'll do it, but we need to discuss terms," she said flatly as she walked back into the kitchen.

He'd showered and dressed while she'd been up in her room and was once again leather-clad and sexy as all get-out, long legs outstretched, boots propped on the kitchen table, arms folded behind his head. He no longer looked angry but was once again coolly, almost lazily, at ease.

"A wise decision, *ka-lyrra*" His dark gaze swept her from head to toe, a palpable, erotic caress that reminded her that, no matter how dead-set she was against him, her traitorous body was all for him. He inclined his head regally. "I am pleased you will aid me, and will consider your terms."

She bristled at his princely demeanor but refused to be baited. Her terms were critical. "First, I will only approach a solitary Fae. I'll reveal myself to no more of your kind than I have to."

He shook his head. "You won't find a solitary Fae. Have you

seen any alone since they arrived in your city?"

Gabby thought about it for a moment. Now that he mentioned it, no, she hadn't seen any alone. They were always in groups, or at least pairs. Even the one that had walked between her and Marian Temple, blowing her dream job, had only broken away from a small group that it had rejoined when it moved on.

"Why is that?" Her brows drew together in a frown. There was so much she didn't understand about the Fae.

"Tuatha Dé do not walk the human realm alone. Actually they don't walk alone much anywhere. Only the occasional rogue Fae will do so."

"Like yourself?"

"Yes. Most of my kind have no fondness for solitude. Those who walk alone are not to be trusted"

"Really," she said dryly.

"Except for me," he amended, with a faint, insouciant grin.

"I'll approach a pair, no more. Minimal exposure is my goal."

"Understood."

"And you will guarantee not only my safety from your kind, but the safety of my future children. You must promise me that I can live out the rest of my life in peace, safe from being taken by the Fae, or having anyone I love taken. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"How?" she snapped.

Another lazy, appreciative glance down, then up, her body.

"You'll have to trust me, *ka-lyrra*. All I can give you is my word. And though you doubt me, once given, it's inviolate. It's securing my word that's so difficult. But you have it. As you've had since the day we met."

She supposed that was all she was going to get. Anything she did from this moment forward was going to require a leap of faith in some direction. She sighed gustily. "Fine. But you just better understand that, number one, I know how stupid it is to take the word of the *sin siriche du*, but I don't have any other choice; and number two, if you don't keep it, I'll make your existence a living hell any way I can, and if I get killed somehow, I'll come back as a ghost and haunt you. For *all eternity*. And if you don't think I could, you don't know the first thing about O'Callaghan women. We persist. We never give up." Well, her mom had, she amended darkly, but she wasn't including her mom.

He smiled faintly, bitterly. Her refusal to trust him chafed. He might mislead a bit, rely on disinformation and evasion from time to time, but on those rare occasions he gave his word he stood behind it.

"Come, *ka-lyrra*, you can threaten and malign me while we're sifting place."

When he rose and moved toward her, extending his hand, she backed up hastily.

"I am so not doing that vanishing thing you do." She was firmly in the Dr. McCoy camp when it came to the transporter room on the *Enterprise*. There would be no beaming Gabby O'Callaghan up, down, or anywhere.

She liked her feet firmly planted on the ground.

He arched a brow. "Why not?"

"I have no desire to be... whatever it is one has to be, to be... translated... through wherever it is you go," she said. "No thank you. I'll stay right here in my world."

He shrugged. "We'll drive then." He waved his hand toward the back door, gesturing that he would follow.

The playful curve of his lips coupled with his suspiciously swift capitulation should have warned her.

She opened the door, stepped out onto the top step, and froze. He stopped behind her, but just barely, crowding her with his big body. Was that his chin grazing the top of her head, his unshaven jaw against her hair?

She took several slow deep breaths, then, "Okay, what happened to my car?"

"That is your car."

"I may not know much lately," she gutted, "but I do know what I drive. I drive a falling-apart Toyota. A disgustingly powdery-blue one. With lots of rust and no antenna *That* is not my car."

"Correction. You used to drive a falling apart Toyota, B.A"

Had his lips just brushed her hair? She shivered, and though she knew better than to ask, she did it anyway. "Okay, you got me, what's 'B.A.'?"

"Before Adam. After Adam, you drive a BMW. I take care of what is mine. That Toyota wasn't safe."

Figured the arrogant beast would define himself as the dawning of an epoch. "I'm not yours, it was too, and you can't just go

around stealing— "

"I didn't. I filled out all the paperwork myself. And there was a ridiculous amount of paperwork. What is it with you humans and paperwork? You have so much time you can afford to squander it? We have all the time in the world, and you won't catch us doing paperwork. You are now in every possible regard the legal owner of that car. And no one will ever be able to prove otherwise. The *féth fiada* has many advantages, Gabrielle."

"I will *not* drive a stolen car," she snapped as he slipped a hand around her from behind, offering her the keys.

"It's not stolen," he repeated patiently, softly, close to her ear. "According to the dealer's records, it was paid for in full. They wouldn't take it back even if you tried to give it to than. And if you refuse to drive it, am I to assume that means you've changed your mind about traveling my way?"

As his other hand began to slip around her waist, his body brushed against hers, and there was no mistaking the thick, hard ridge grazing her jean-clad bottom. Heavens, did that thing never subside? The rest of him might be mortal, but his immortal erection certainly didn't scan to have gotten the memo. Snatching the keys from his hand, she jerked away.

Nibbling her lip, she glared at the spot where only last night her dilapidated little Corolla had sat. In its place was a brand-new BMW. And if she wasn't mistaken, it was one of those high-aid roadsters. It was red. And shiny. It had all its trim and everything. And it was a *convertible*.

I take care of what's mine, he'd said. And a purely feminine part of her had felt a shiver that was more delicious than chilling.

Oh, yes, she was going to hell in a handbasket.

But as far as handbaskets went, she thought glumly, it was an awfully nice one.

* * *

"Cincinnati." said Mael, appearing abruptly at Darroc's side.

"What? You've found him?" Darroc turned, startled. He'd not expected such swift developments.

"Yes. Apparently he's looking for his half-blood son there."

"You're certain of this?"

"I haven't been to the human city myself, but Callan saw him there only a few days ago. He'd sensed the presence of many Tuatha Dé sifting to that dimension and wondered at it. He confirmed that Adam is there. And that he can't see us at all."

Darroc smiled. The power a Tuatha Dé used when sifting dimensions left a residue other Tuatha Dé could sense. Though imprecise, though it scattered swiftly with the passage of time, the residue, when fresh, could be tracked to a general area.

"Excellent, Mael. You've done well."

Adam Black was going to die. And Darroc was going to watch. He would command the Hunters to take it slow, to strike first

only to wound...

* * *

Her handbasket was, to be precise, a BMW Alpina Roadster V8.

Complete with climate-controlled leather seats, navigation system, Harman Kardon stereo, handless phone, and an engine that simply purred with sleek, state-of-the-art muscle.

Gabby guided the ultimate driving machine into the parking garage beneath Fountain Square, eased into a parking space, and turned it off with a sigh of genuine relief. One of the nice things about her Corolla was that she'd never been afraid she might wreck it; it wouldn't have looked much different if she had. Nor had she ever worried about getting a speeding ticket, because unless she caught a serious back wind, she was lucky to hit sixty in it.

But this thing; oh, this car was almost as dangerous as the fairy who'd stolen it.

Unsnapping her seat belt, she slipped her purse over her shoulder, got out of the car, waited impatiently while he disentangled himself (the roadster wasn't an easy fit for a man of his brawn), then pressed the little button on the keypad to engage the alarm.

When she'd first slid into the plush leather seats of the dreamy

car, she'd popped open the glove box and damned if there hadn't been a tidy little registration in there, free of lien, with her name on it.

And the bill of sale: \$137,856.02.

No doubt about it, her life had plunged from the realm of the absurd into the downright surreal. She'd just driven a car that cost more than a lot of people's houses did. And already a tiny part of her was busy making the case that, considering she was risking her life, surely she was entitled to some recompense? It was only a car, right? And nobody would ever know. It wasn't as if she were hinting anybody. He'd said so himself: How was she ever going to convince anybody to take it back when it sure looked like she was the legal owner? And there were no outstanding parking tickets on it. No warrant for her arrest. Which begged the interesting question: "What did you do with my car?"

"Drove it into the Ohio River." he said mildly.

"Oh." Well. Nothing she'd not been tempted to do herself a time or two. Looked like she was stuck with the BMW if she wanted to get to work next week. Assuming she lived thorough the weekend.

"Hurry up," she said, impatient to get on with things. She couldn't shake the ominous feeling that her life had only begun its downward spiral and worse things were yet to come.

As they stepped from the dark garage into the momentarily blinding sunlight and began walking toward the square. Gabby scanned the busy streets, searching for fairies. The sidewalks were teeming with people moving en masse down toward the river in the general direction of the stadium. Must be a baseball

game, she decided, briefly torturing herself with the thought of normal, pleasant things like hot dogs and beer and pretzels, family outings, and the sharp crack of ball against a bat.

Once again people were out doing things, socializing and having fun, while she was frantically attempting to rectify the latest fairy debacle.

"Just what am I supposed to say when I find these beings?" she asked irritably.

"Tell them that I'd like an audience with the queen at the next new moon."

"The next *new moon*?" Scowling, she stopped walking. "Why not today? When is the next new moon?"

He shrugged. "The last one was a few days ago. We missed it." At her pointed glare, he added. "She only grants audiences once per cycle of the mortal moon."

"You've got to be kidding me."

He was, but not about to admit to it. He'd realized in the car—while watching her hand close around the leather-bound stick shift, and mentally substituting his own leather-clad stick shift that seemed to have gotten firmly lodged in overdrive— that if they were successful today, he'd lose his human body.

He'd gotten strangely all-too-humanly panicked. His stomach had actually felt queasy and he'd nearly insisted she turn around. The only thing that had stopped him was that he knew that if she knew that he wanted to stay human just so he could have sex with her, she'd go beg every fairy she could find to take him away this very instant.

And one of them might.

Aoibheal had no such ridiculous schedule, but what his petite *ka-lyrra* didn't know, she couldn't use against him. He would get her to tell them to come collect him at the next new-moon. He'd easily have her in bed long before then. Get to sate his curiosity before reclaiming his rightful place.

"I am not going to be stuck with you until then," she was saying.

He smiled. By Danu, she was sexy when she was angry: eyes sparkling, nostrils flaring, breasts rising and falling with her tight, angry breaths.

When he made no reply, she flung an exasperated hand in the direction of a bench some distance away, in the middle of the square. "Oh, just go sit over there, okay? They tend to hang out on the square sometimes. I think they like to people-watch, or I suppose *fairies* would say human-watch."

When he opened his mouth to disagree, of no mind to sit so far away from her, she placed her palm flush to his chest and gave him a little push toward the bench. It was the first time she'd touched him of her own accord. And he'd not missed the tiny hesitation after she'd placed her hand on his body before pushing. As if she had savored the feel of his chest beneath her hand. Her barriers were dropping. Fascinating.

"You can't sit here with me or every fairy that sees us together will know I can see you. I get to choose who to reveal myself to," she gritted. "When I see the ones I want, I'll wave you over."

"As you wish, Gabrielle."

11

It was late in the day before Gabby spotted a pair of Fae she was willing to approach. The ball-game-goers had long since swept back through downtown, retrieving their cars (the Reds won; she'd heard the fireworks), and the sun had ducked low behind the skyscrapers that hemmed Fountain Square, gilding the silvery-windowed walls fiery rose and slanting tall early-evening shadows across the square.

During the interminable wait she'd realized the Fae were, indeed, watching him. Many appeared throughout the course of the day. But since he was just sitting there doing nothing, most of them went away after only a short time. She supposed he wasn't being very entertaining.

Finally, she spotted her two. She chose them because they weren't as blindingly beautiful as the rest, and she hoped, rather like people, the less attractive ones weren't quite so... well, were more approachable.

A male and a female, both blond and shimmery-eyed, were standing near the bench Adam was sitting on, deep in conversation. Rather than waving him over, she decided to join him and get it over with.

"What? Haven't you seen any?" Adam asked, as she approached.

Did that husky, Celtic-accented voice sound almost... cheery? She shook her head at the idiotic notion, deciding the sun must have baked her brains during the long, tedious afternoon.

"They're right there," she told him, pointing.

"Where?" He looked where she was pointing and muttered a string of curses. "Christ, I can't believe I can't even see them. Are they looking at me?"

"Not at the moment. And they're there," she said, trying to correct his gaze, "standing about ten feet to your left, less than a foot from the trash can." She drew a deep breath, bracing herself to approach them, when suddenly the male fairy turned and looked at her.

"Hello," she said politely. "I'd like to speak with you a moment. I need to— "

"I do believe it sees us, Aine," the male fairy spoke over her, with a haughty lift of a brow.

It? Gabby thought, nostrils flaring. *It* was calling *her* an *it*? The nerve. The unmitigated gall. She was human. She had a soul. It wasn't and didn't. If anyone was an it, it was it not her.

"Oh, get over yourselves already. I'm just here to pass on a message. Adam Black wants me to tell you ..." Gabby blinked and trailed off. They'd turned their backs to her and were paying her no attention whatsoever, carrying on a hushed conversation that she couldn't overhear.

Then the male fairy nodded, and suddenly both fairies vanished. There one moment, then gone.

Exhaling gustily. Gabby clenched her hands into little fists and

tinned to Adam. "Are all of you so damned arrogant?"

"What do you mean? What are they saying?"

"They're not saying anything. They're gone. They called me an 'it', said something to each other, and vanished."

His eyes narrowed. "If this is some kind of trick.. ."

"It's not," she said impatiently. "I swear, they were here. I was trying to talk to them, and they just vanished."

"What did they look like?" he demanded.

She described them, adding that the male had called the female "Aine."

Rolling his eyes, he groaned. "I know her."

"And?"

"She's a princess from Aoibheal's line, the First House of the *D'Anu*, and the only thing royal about her is how much of a pain in the ass she is. But she'll help me. She'll be back."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Yes, Aine has always had a bit of a thing for me. Perhaps more than a bit. Actually." he said with a long-suffering sigh, "she's obsessed with me."

Figured, Gabby thought irritably. Even other fairies weren't immune to his seduction. What did that say about a human woman's chances? There should be a vaccine against Adam Black. And all women should be given it at birth.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to the bench beside him. "It won't be long. She'll be back. Aine will refuse me nothing."

Gabby began to sit, then stopped. Another fairy had suddenly appeared over by the fountain, alone. A solitary one. Just what she'd been hoping for all afternoon. Just what Adam had said she'd never find. "Well, you were wrong," she grumbled, feeling inexplicably irked about Aine-who-would-refuse-him-nothing, "because there's a fairy over there, all by himself."

Adam surged to his feet, inhaling sharply, audibly. "What? Where? No. wait— don't point, *ka-lyrra*. Don't even look at him again. Or at me. Move away, give me your back, then tell me what he looks like." he hissed.

Gabby glanced at him. She couldn't help it— he sounded so alarmed.

"Don't *look* at me," he hissed again softly. "Do as I said."

Jarred by the urgency in his voice. Gabby obeyed, moving away. Turning, giving him her profile, she rested her hands on a low stone wall that encircled an arrangement of sculptured shrubs and flowers and pretended to be enjoying the view. Dropping her head forward so her hair shielded her face, she said clearly, softly, "He's tall. Copper hair, gold highlights. Black torque and armbands. wearing—"

"White robes and he has a scar on his face," Adam finished for her.

"Yes."

"Gabrielle, walk away from me this instant and don't look back. As fast and far as you can. Do it. Now."

But, damn the woman, he should have known she wouldn't obey a direct order again. The first time must have been a fluke; she obviously didn't have an obedient, malleable bone in her

body.

She looked back at him, searching his face, her brows drawn in confusion.

And was that a touch of concern in her lovely green-gold eyes? Concern for *him*? Though he was pleased to see the first hint of such weakness, at the moment, it could prove her undoing. She'd just described Darroc and, if Darroc got his hands on him in his current condition, well... he wouldn't be having an audience with Aoibheal— ever again. And if Darroc got his hands on Gabrielle... Adam tensed, refusing to complete the thought. Bloody hell, he hadn't anticipated this! "Go." he growled.

But even as he said it, he saw her face change. She was no longer looking at him; her gaze had fixed on a point slightly to the right of and behind him. Her mouth had dropped open, her eyes had gone impossibly wide, and her face was bloodlessly white.

"H-h-h— *huuumh— huuumh-*" she gurgled.

Adam reacted instantly, able to think of only one thing that might put that look on her face and make her tongue trip all over an *H*.

Hunters.

"G-g-g— " she tried again.

And if there were Hunters in the same place as Darroc, they hadn't come for her. At least not first. There were thousands of years of bad blood between him and the High Council Elder, and he could think of little Darroc would enjoy more than watching the Hunters rip him to pieces while he was in mortal

form. Then and only then would he turn his attentions to the *Sidhe-seer*. And his petite *ka-lyrra* wouldn't stand a chance. In Darroc's hands, every dark and twisted fairy tale she'd ever been told would come true.

He launched himself at her.

Christ, they were surrounded by danger that he couldn't *see*!. How was he supposed to protect her? Whose stupid bloody idea had this been, anyway?

As his hands closed on her shoulders, something whizzed past his arm with a soft whine. Snaking an arm around her waist, he twisted and ducked, pulling her into the shelter of his body, wincing as something burned the back of his shoulder.

Closing his eyes, he held her tightly and sifted place in a general southerly direction, pushing to the farthest limits his diminished power could carry him. The moment he rematerialized, he instantly sifted again, arms locked around her.

Railroad track. Sift. Grocery store. Keep moving. Roof of a house. Sift. Cornfield. Sift. Cornfield. Sift. Cornfield. Sift. Cornfield. Bloody Midwest. Sift. Atop the steeple of a church with no way to balance on the narrow slippery spire.

They began to fall, plummeting past crosses and gargoyles, and he hastily sifted them in midair. He kept moving, faster and dizzyingly faster, without pausing for a breath, trying desperately to put as much distance as possible between his enemy and his wee, much-too-mortal *ka-lyrra*.

* * *

Gabby was sure she was screaming at the top of her lungs, but nothing was coming out.

Adam Black's arms weren't just tight around her body, he'd managed to wrap himself around her like a living shield.

But that wasn't what was making her choke on a scream. It was that she kept materializing and dematerializing. Sort of. One moment she existed, and then she didn't exist, and then she existed again. She didn't like it one bit. Each time she was in a different place. Stores. Parking lots. Cornfields. A lot of those. Suddenly on the peak of the slender, pointed spire of— *ack!*— a church, and *falling!*. As the pavement rushed up to meet them, they were suddenly, blessedly, somewhere else.

After a while, she just closed her eyes and prayed, trying really hard not to think about much of anything, especially not how wrong the *Books of the Fae* had been about the Hunters.

They'd been even more horrifying in the flesh, if that was what they were made of, than the O'Callaghan *Books* had said. Naturally, there were no pictures of them, because any O'Callaghan who'd seen them had been taken. What little description was given, likened them to a classic version of the Devil, hoofed, winged, and horned. And they were, sort of, but even worse. Tall, leathery-skinned, with glowing orange eyes like windows into hell, they had wings, sharp teeth, and long, lethal claws. And she wasn't certain, but she thought she'd seen a tail. The only thing she didn't understand was why, when they

were so obviously capable of ripping their prey to shreds with their bare... er, handlike appendages, they'd been shooting at them with human guns.

* * *

When finally they stopped in a grassy dealing. Gabby couldn't speak for several long moments. She was, she realized, soaked from head to toe. Water was gushing from her hair, plastering it to her face. She stood shaking in his arms, leaning back into the strength of his hard body, gulping one deep breath after another.

"Are you all right, *ka-lyrra*?" he said close to her ear.

"All right? All *right*?" Exploding from his grasp, she spun around to face him. Scraping the sodden hair from her face, she shouted.

"Do I *look* all right? Of course I'm not all right. My life is falling apart around my ears and you ask me if I'm all right?"

Mascara was dripping down her cheeks, splattering on her shirt. She backed away from him, eyes narrowing. Her shoes squished with the movement and, as she peered uncomprehendingly down at them, a tadpole emerged from the leg of her jeans and flopped about on the ground.

"*Eew!*" She pointed a shaking finger at it. "A tadpole. I had a

tadpole in my pants!"

"Lucky tadpole," he murmured. Then, "When one sifts place, *ka-lyrra*, one comes out on top of whatever currently occupies that space. Which isn't much of a problem if one also has all one's other powers. But I don't. We hit a lake somewhere around the ninety-seventh hop. And, contrary to popular belief, I don't walk on water."

Frantically running her hands up and down her drenched jeans, feeling about for anymore creepy-crawlies, she hissed. "Oh, I hate you. I hate you." So maybe she sounded like a child having a temper tantrum, but really, she seethed, ever since she'd met him she'd just been having one unsettling, disturbing, bizarre experience after another. She'd nearly had a heart attack on top of that church. Just when she'd begun to think she was getting the hang of it, that it wasn't quite so awful being deconstructed then reconstructed again and again and again, she'd been gagging on foul-tasting, smelly, fishy, mossy water.

"No you don't," he said softly.

"I *drank* some of that lake! I might have choked on a fish or a frog or a... a... a turtle!"

"It is wisest to keep one's mouth shut while sifting."

She skewered him with a frosty stare. "Now you tell me." Damn the fairy, anyway. There she stood, feeling ragtag and bedraggled, and he only looked more beautiful wet, all drippy and shimmery gold-velvet, his hair a wet tangle to his waist.

"Come, Gabrielle," he said, extending his hand, "we must keep moving. They can track me by what little magic I'm using to sift, but only to a general vicinity. We need to keep sifting, to spread

out their search."

"Is there anything *else* it's wisest to do that I should know about before we just pop off again?" She tucked her hands behind her back so he couldn't grab her and just sift rather than answering her. Besides, she needed a minute to brace herself for the next bout of traveling in a manner that defied all the known laws of physics.

"You might try kissing me. Better my tongue than a frog, no?" Dark eyes sparking gold, he reached for her.

"Close contest," she growled the lie, backing away, hands still tucked behind her back. She glanced pointedly at the flopping tadpole.

"What?"

"Take it back "

"You're kidding. right?" he said disbelievingly.

"Do we have time?"

He considered that. "Yes, but— "

"Then, no I'm not."

"That lake was three hops ago," he said impatiently.

"If you don't take it back it's going to die, and while you may think it's just a pathetic little thing with an abbreviated little life that hardly even signifies in the fairy scheme of things. I'll bet in the tadpole scheme of things it's really looking forward to becoming a frog. Now take it back. A life is a life. I don't care how tiny an almighty fairy thinks it is."

One dark brow arched and he inclined his head. "Yes, Gabrielle." Scooping up the tadpole in one big hand, gently enough that it gave her pause, he popped out.

* * *

While he was gone Gabby scraped the slimy moss from her purse (which she was rather stunned to find still looped over her shoulder), unzipped it, and inspected the contents. For a novel change, she was glad she could afford only cheap purses—the fake leather had proved waterproof. Fishing out her compact, she scrubbed away the remnants of her makeup and plucked algae from her hair, ruefully acknowledging that things were now pretty much as bad as they could get.

She was not only still stuck with Adam Black, but other fairies now knew that she could see them, and some rogue fairy—according to Adam, one of those not to be trusted—had also found her out and in the thick of it all somebody had summoned the Hunters.

She shuddered at the memory. One moment she'd been staring at Adam, trying to figure out why he sounded so tense and urgent, the next, horrific creatures from her worst nightmares had materialized out of thin air behind him.

And they'd had guns, which she found bizarre enough, but even more strangely, they'd been shooting— not at her— but *him*.

What on earth was going on?

Dabbing away a last smudge of mascara, she went still. He'd not been able to see them. All he'd been able to see was her face, and she knew how horrified she must have looked. She'd been incapable of forming a single word; the blood in her veins had turned to ice, freezing her solidly in place. Had it not been for Adam, she'd have stood there squawking silently, helplessly, until the Hunters had done whatever it was Hunters did to *Sidhe-seers*. She'd tried desperately to say "Hunters" and "guns" but hadn't been able to spit out a syllable.

And what had he done? The last thing she'd have imagined. He'd lunged forward without hesitation to shield her. Wrapped his powerful body around hers. Knowing that something awful was behind him, he'd not instantly sifted himself to safety. He'd used his mortal, no-longer-invincible body to protect her. He could have simply translated himself elsewhere and abandoned her, which was exactly what she expected from a cold-blooded fairy.

He only did it because now he needs you even more. He has to protect you. You're his eyes for the enemies he can't see.

"The tadpole has been returned to its watery home, *ka-lyrra*." Adam materialized before her, shaking like a great wet beast, water droplets flying everywhere. He cocked his dark head, absorbing her serious expression. "All will be well, Gabrielle. I won't let anyone harm you. Not today. Not ever."

"Because now you need me more than ever," she said bitterly. "You *have* to keep me alive."

He cocked his head and regarded her for a long, measuring moment. "In case you've forgotten, I tried to make you leave the

moment you told me about the lone Tuatha Dé. I said, to be precise, 'Walk away from me this instant and don't look back. As fast and far as you can.' You chose not to heed me. And I could always find another *Sidhe-seer*, Gabrielle. I read your books. One of them lists the names of the bloodlines in Ireland that carry the vision. All the bloodlines."

"It does?" Gabby was horrified. Where? How had she missed it? Why had they ever been written down? Oh, *why* hadn't someone burned those pages long ago?

He nodded. "In the first tome, scribed in the ancient tongue. Pages of names. So you see, I don't need you. I know human ways far better than my enemies. I could easily conceal myself long enough to track another one down."

"Then, why don't you?" she asked faintly.

And how would she survive if he did?

"I endangered your life. I will fix it."

Gabby blinked up at him. His voice was tight, his accent more clipped than usual and, were he a normal man, she would have thought he was furious with himself for having placed her in jeopardy.

Ok for crying out loud, her inner fourteen-year-old snapped, even for a Fae prince he sounds furious with himself for having placed you in jeopardy. Cut him some slack, would you?

She stood, mouth open, a dozen different questions vying for her tongue, but he shook his head.

"Not now. We must go. There will be a place to talk soon enough. This is not it. Come."

Gabby stood, tucking her purse securely over her shoulder. As she moved to join him, she suddenly noticed that the water trickling down his wet shirt held a reddish tinge.

"Are you hurt?" she exclaimed, reaching for his arm.

He twisted away with a shrug. "It's nothing—"

"Let me— "

"Leave it. I'm fine. I rinsed it out in the lake. It's not deep. Come, Irish. Hand. In mine. Now."

When she just stood there, frowning worriedly up at him, he said, "I have no intention of expiring before I'm made immortal again. Rest assured, if I say it's of no consequence, it isn't." He paused a moment, then added softly, "And you needn't fear, Gabrielle. I destroyed them."

"The Hunters?" she said blankly. "No you didn't."

"The pages that name the *Sidhe-seers*. You shouldn't make things so easy for my race. They can be without mercy, dangerous."

"Unlike you, that oh-so-nice-guy-Adam-Black?" The caustic comment slipped from her tongue before she could stop it.

He shot her a look of impatient rebuke. "Try to see past your preconceptions, Irish, would you? Try seeing *me*."

Okay, now that messed with her head. Made her feel like she was being judgmental and petty. She wasn't judgmental, she was merely going by the facts, and the facts were—

Well, the facts were... er, that she wasn't entirely certain what the facts were at the moment.

Damn it! Why couldn't things just be black and white? Human good, fairy bad. Simple! That was what she'd been raised to believe.

Had he really destroyed those pages betraying all the *Sidhe-seers*? Why? Why would he even expend the effort?

For that matter, why had he so gently retrieved the flopping tadpole from the ground and returned it? There was no doubt that he had; he'd been freshly drenched again. He could have just lied (after all, lying was supposed to be his second nature) and told her there was no time. She would have believed him; she had no idea what Hunters were capable of.

And he *had* told her to walk away the minute she'd spotted the lone fairy. Had he truly meant to send her away for her own protection, at his own risk?

What kind of fairy did such things? A legendary seducer and deceiver?

Or... halfway decent fairy? *Was* there such a thing?

At a complete loss, she slipped her hand into his.

His big hand swallowed hers, making her feel dainty and feminine. She tipped her head back, looking up at his chiseled face. His eyes were dark, his jaw set. And he looked so very... human.

As they began to sift, she was ambushed by the realization that, though she knew she wasn't *safe from* him, she felt strangely safe *with* him.

* * *

They didn't stop again until well after nightfall. Actually, she mused muzzily, it felt nearer to dawn. She'd lost track of the passage of time during their discombobulating passage through place.

He sifted them onto a passenger train just outside of Louisville, Kentucky, explaining that they now needed to travel by human means for a while, to ensure the Fae couldn't track them. Assuring her that the Hunters would be tangled up for quite some time in the net of magic-residue he'd left behind.

She was once again so tired she could barely function. When he guided her through the cars until they found a nearly empty one, then took a seat by the window and pulled her in next to him, she sank limply down. Since Adam Black's advent into her life, her sleep schedule had become the biggest joke.

Judging by the faint streaks of orange and pink on the horizon beyond the glass, it appeared she'd again been up nearly twenty-four hours straight— and again they'd been some of the most traumatic hours she'd ever endured.

Unable to find a single solid point of reference to latch on to in the recent epidemic of otherworldly events, she decided to deal with it all later and yielded to exhaustion, slumping down in the seat, chin nodding toward her chest.

And when he pulled her across the seats, stretched out his long muscular legs and drew her into his arms, she only gave a weary little sigh and curled up against him. Her jeans were still damp,

she had no blanket, and could use the body heat.

Still, that was no excuse to press her cheek to his chest and inhale deeply of his spicy masculine scent. She did it anyway.

"You aren't falling for me, are you, Irish?" he purred, sounding amused.

"Hardly," she muttered.

"Good. I'd hate to think you were falling for me."

So would she. Oh, God, so would she.

Adam shifted position carefully, trying to take the pressure off his shoulder without disturbing Gabrielle.

She was sleeping in his arms. Had been for hours, easy as could be. Her face, in repose, was sweet, youthful, innocent, and utterly beautiful to him. He traced a finger down her cheek, studying the subtle, soft planes, wondering at what made beauty. In thousands of years he'd still not figured it out. Whatever it was, she had it in spades. She was warm and earthy and vibrant, unlike the coolly flawless females of his race. She was fiery autumn and spring thunder, while Tuatha Dé women were a silvery winter that went on and on. She was just the kind of lass a Highlander might take to wife; laugh with and argue with and make love to for the rest of his life.

She sighed in her sleep and curled closer, nestling her cheek against his chest. He understood what was responsible for the sudden change in her demeanor, what had caused the lamb to slump down in exhaustion against the wolf. Not trust, no, not from his fiery *Sidhe-seer* (though he was beginning to see some signs of thawing); circumstances alone had driven her into his arms. Until late this afternoon she'd perceived him as her greatest threat. Now there was a greater threat, and he was suddenly her only ally against it.

No matter the reason, he liked feeling her soft and yielding to

his strength. Unconscious, vulnerable, entrusted to his care while her mind was steeped in dreams. He liked it a great deal. Enough, in fact, that he— who had no patience with physical discomfort— would put up with pain rather than wake her. Fortunately, the bullet had only grazed him, presenting no significant threat to his mortal form.

Hunters carrying guns. He rubbed his jaw and shook his head. When she'd told him what she'd seen, during the few pauses he'd permitted them while sifting place, he'd been incensed.

At himself.

What a fool he'd been. A week ago, he'd thought his most pressing problem a severe case of frustration and boredom. Then he'd found Gabrielle, and his most pressing problem had been how best to seduce her.

Now his most pressing problem was how the bloody hell to keep them both alive.

It didn't take Tuatha Dé genius to understand the significance of Hunters carrying human weapons. Not in the presence of Darroc.

How swiftly he'd forgotten all he'd left behind in Faery upon being banished from that realm— the complications, the tensions, the incessant court intrigues— but he'd been thoroughly wallowing in his aggravation at being human. What a fool he'd been to forget Darroc for even a moment. The bad blood between him and the High Council Elder stretched back four and a half millennia, to a time before The Compact between Fae and Man. To a time before the deadly spear and lethal sword his race had brought with them from Danu— two of the four Hallows, and the only weapons capable of doing

injury to or even killing an immortal— had been removed from Faery and secreted away. All the way back to that day Adam had taken up the sword and laid open Darroc's face, giving him the scar he still sported.

He'd like to pretend he'd tried to kill Darroc for a noble reason, but the simple truth was they'd been fighting over a mortal woman. Adam had seen her first. But the queen had summoned him back to court for some nonsense or another, and Darroc had gotten to her first. Knowing full well Adam had wanted her.

Darroc had killed her. There were those among his race who believed that beauty and innocence could truly be savored only via their destruction. There were those among his race who, in that lawless time before The Compact, when they'd first arrived on this world and were scouting it, not yet having settled it. had fed like scavengers on the passion they could elicit from a human during sex. not caring that it killed the mortal in the process. He'd seen what Darroc had done to her when he'd returned. Gone was the laughing, teasing young maiden who'd been so vibrantly alive. Sadistically broken and forever silenced. Her death hadn't come easy. And for no bloody frigging good reason. Her murder had been an act of bitter, senseless violence. Adam had done his fair share of killing in that lawless time, but for reasons.

Always for reasons. Never just for the pleasure of it.

The loathing spawned between him and Darroc that day had never waned. Leashed by the queen, under threat of dire recompense (a soulless death at the queen's hand, no less), they'd taken their vicious battle into the arena of court politics. An arena in which Adam had perfected his powers of subtlety and seduction, tools he'd used to defeat Darroc on many

occasions. The Elder, too, had changed with time, perfecting a cunning that equaled his brutality. While Darroc secured a seat on the queen's council, Adam managed to secure her ear in other ways. He and the Elder were by far the most powerfully persuasive figures at court, staunchly on opposing sides, and with Adam gone... well, he had no doubt that already the complacent courtiers were being turned to the Elder's arms. How long, he brooded darkly, before Darroc managed to turn some of them against Aoibheal herself? Was she aware of the danger she'd created by casting Adam out?

So Darroc had tried to kill him, he mused. And with guns at that. Had he been trying to make it look as if Adam had gotten caught in stray fire from some human dispute? Knowing Darroc, he would play the odds that once Adam was gone, the queen would be able to prove nothing if Adam's body sported only man-made wounds.

Though Adam mocked human law, Tuatha Dé code was equally convoluted. Without solid proof, the queen would never punish one of their own. Their numbers were no longer increasing as they'd once been. Though he'd once told Circenn he was virile in Tuatha Dé form, it had been but one of many, many lies he'd told his son. Few of them could still sire offspring, and although the Tuatha Dé didn't exactly die, sometimes they... went away.

Gabrielle stirred in his arms, jarring him from his thoughts. She shifted, tucking her knees up, snuggling closer to his body. She was curled on her side between his legs, cradled against his chest, and he sucked in a sharp breath, shuddering, as the generous, sweet curve of her hip nestled against his cock. Which was, as ever, ready and willing. That part of his body was simply uncontrollable, apparently functioning in accordance to a single law of nature: She existed— he got a hard-on.

Christ, he wanted her. Force had never seemed such a tempting option, yet force would make him no better than Darroc.

He would accept nothing less than her willing surrender.

But, bloody hell, it had better be soon. He was currently only human. With a Tuatha Dé's conscience. Or lack thereof.

* * *

Gabby stretched gingerly, taking careful note of every muscle in her body that ached.

That would be all of them.

She was crinked from head to toe and dream-befuddled, with absolutely no idea where she was.

She opened her eyes warily.

Adam Black was staring down at her, his dark gaze unfathomable.

"Good morning, *ka-lyrra*," he purred with a slow, heart-stoppingly sexy smile.

"Highly debatable," she muttered. Any morning that had him in it was bound to be many things, but good was hardly the first adjective she'd choose. Dangerous? Yes. Endlessly tempting? Yes. Eventful. Perhaps even fascinating. But not good.

"I'd have procured coffee for you but you're on top of me, and I was loath to disturb your slumber."

He looked as if he were about to say more, but she didn't give him the chance. She was too appalled by her discovery that he was reclining back against the window and she was sprawled uninhibitedly on top of his big, warm body, astride one of his powerful thighs (with something hard against her belly that she was trying really, really hard not to think about), her breasts crushed against his chest, and oh— her hand was curled in his hair! As if she'd been petting him or something in her sleep!

"Sorry," she said hastily, disentangling herself, snapping upright, and scooting away.

He came with her, his hand closing around her wrist like a steel band. "Not so fast, Irish."

"Let me g— " Gabby froze. She'd managed to get off him and was sitting up all right. But something was wrong. It took her a moment to figure out what it was. Someone else was sitting in her.

Sitting in her.

She opened her mouth to scream but he clamped a hand over it. He rose, pulling her up with him, and half-carried, half-dragged her from their seats. Holding her tightly, he walked her down the aisle through car after car until they came to an empty one.

Only then did he let her go.

Wide-eyed, she backed up against a seat and stared at him. Her mouth opened and closed repeatedly.

"Easy, *ka-lyrra*. It's just the effect of the *féth fiada*"

Her tongue unstuck. "What are you *saying*?" she wailed. "Am I cursed now too? Did you let somebody curse me while I was sleeping? Is it contagious or something?" She thumped him in the chest with a fist. "How could you *do* this to me? I trusted you!"

He arched a dark, slanted brow. "You did? Imagine that, and me the *sin siriche du* and all, only your mortal enemy."

"Oooh! I don't mean that I trust you, like with important things, but I thought at least I could count on you to— "

"You're not cursed, Gabrielle," he soothed. "It's merely that when I touch you the curse affecting me encompasses you as well. I wasn't sure exactly how it was working until the lady sat in you, and then it was too late."

"I thought I was immune to it," she cried.

"You are. The *féth fiada* doesn't *work* on you. But it works *on* you."

"Not getting this." she hissed, running her hands up and down her body, making sure she was really real.

"As with any other object in the human realm, when I touch you you get drawn into the enchantment that surrounds me. You become invisible and noncorporeal to other humans. Until I stop touching you. Hence, you were sat in. I tried to warn you but you pulled away too quickly. I didn't dare release you while you were being occupied, because I'm not certain what would happen if I did."

Gabby blanched. "You mean, you think if I became corporeal again while someone was in me..." She couldn't finish the thought.

He nodded. "That someone might be... er, incorporated. But then again, they might not. It might work like sifting, where things come out on top of each other. Wouldn't that be a laugh? Can you imagine the look on that woman's face if you'd suddenly appeared on top of her? Unless..." he mused thoughtfully, "with a *Sidhe-seer* it's so difficult to predict; Fae power doesn't work the way it's supposed to around you, which is what we find so unacceptable about your kind. Perhaps some part of the confusion element would— "

"I don't think it would be a laugh at all." Gabby snapped. "It felt really bad to be sat in. Like I was a ghost or something."

He nodded. "I know."

Her eyes narrowed. "So help me understand this. When you're touching me, I can't be seen or felt by any other humans?"

"Right."

"But the Fae can still see us?"

"Right."

"But when you're touching me, and I'm not solid to other people, I can still feel everything else. And I could feel you. So am I actually there, or not?"

"It's difficult to explain, *ka-lyrra*; I have no human terms. Your race does not yet possess ones sufficient to discuss in any useful detail"— he broke off, frowning, searching for words— "well, this is a near approximation, though not really at all: complex, element-specific, event-contingent, multidimensional shifting in, a ... you'd say 'spacetime,' but give it thirteen dimensions instead of four. Humans have simultaneity issues and don't deal well with breakdown. Your concept of the universe is not yet

advanced enough, although your scientists have been making progress. Yes, you're real. No, humans can't feel you." He shrugged. "The *féth fiada* doesn't affect animals either. Cats and dogs can see and feel us just fine, which is why they often seem to be staring fixedly at nothing, hissing or barking for no apparent reason."

"Uh-huh. I see. Adam?"

"Yes?"

"If you ever let somebody sit in me again, in any freaking dimension, you won't have to worry about the Hunters. I'll kill you myself."

His dark eyes glittered with amusement. A full foot shorter than he, lesser by at least a hundred pounds, she was bristling up at him, undaunted. Only one other mortal woman had similarly stood her ground before him. Over a thousand years ago, in another time, another world, in ninth-century Scotland. Circenn's mother, Morganna: the only woman to whom he'd ever offered immortality.

Let me die, Adam. I beg of ye, let me die, a smoky feminine burr swirled through his mind.

He tossed his head viciously, shaking the voice away. That was a memory best left in those dark times where it belonged.

Striking without warning, giving her no chance to react, he fisted a hand in the fabric of her shirt, pulled her close, ducked his head, and brushed his lips to hers. Though at the merest touch of his mouth to hers, his cock surged painfully in his jeans and his body raged for more, he kept the kiss light.

Merely rubbing his lips back and forth over hers, with a husky

little purr.

The hand not holding her shirt clenched into a tight fist at his side as he battled the urge to crush her to him. shove his tongue into her mouth, drop her back onto a seat, strip her jeans down, and thrust himself between her thighs.

But he gave her only the barest taste of a kiss. Savoring the erotic friction. Feeling her lips soften beneath his. Relishing the tiny catch in the back of her throat.

Then letting her go.

When he released his grip on her shirt, she stumbled back slightly, looking utterly dazed, much to his satisfaction. Her lush mouth was soft, her green-gold eyes startled and confused and very sleepy-sexy aroused. And he knew if he reached for her again, she'd not fight.

Good.

He wanted her wanting. Wanted her wondering why he'd not taken more. Wanted her primed for the next time he reached for her.

Hunger for me, ka-lyrra, he thought silently, get addicted to me. I will be both venom and antidote, your poison and your only cure.

Aloud he only said softly, "Yes, Gabrielle."

They disembarked that evening in Atlanta, Georgia, and "checked into" a hotel Adam-Black-style.

Only for the night, he said, as they needed to keep moving. But tonight they would shower, rest, and eat "real" food (by which she guessed he meant his usual fare: five-star dining).

He certainly did have exquisite taste, Gabby thought, as she wrapped her long wet hair in a fluffy towel and stepped out of the shower. Along with absolutely no qualms about taking the best of what he wanted. The bathroom she was standing in was nearly the size of her turret bedroom at home, and a designer's dream. Cream marble shot with rose and adorned by gold fixtures, it had a walk-in marble shower with a built-in bench that sported top-of-the-line toiletries, as well as a decadent soaking tub.

She snorted, recalling how effortlessly he'd "appropriated" their luxury accommodations. He certainly did know his way around the human realm. He'd left her standing in the domed entrance to the hotel, gaping at the abundance of glittering crystal, antique furnishings, and Old World elegance, feeling— despite the attempt she'd made on the train at freshening up— the epitome of I've-been-dunked-in-a-lake-and-slept-in-my-smelly-clothes grunge. He'd stalked off for the reservations counter while the doormen had stood sniffing disdainfully at her, and

gone to work, invisible and undetectable, at an unoccupied computer terminal.

A few moments later he'd returned with printed reservations in his hand. He'd taken her arm (which had caused the doormen to stiffen and blink suspiciously at the space she'd only an instant before been occupying) and guided her past them, into the elevator, up to the twenty-third floor.

I'd have gotten the penthouse, he'd told her with a vaguely apologetic air, but it's occupied. This is second best. If you like, we can go to a different hotel.

As if. She'd never seen such exquisite accommodations before. The suite had three sumptuous rooms: a large, opulent bedroom with ornate mirrors, richly brocaded chairs, patterned-silk wallpaper, a real fireplace, and a magnificent canopied king bed; a dining room with an elegant table and leather chairs positioned before a sleek wall of windows that overlooked the city; and a living room with an oversized pullout sofa bed, a plasma TV, two sitting alcoves, and a small attached wet bar/kitchenette.

Why did you bother with reservations? she'd asked. *Why didn't we just sneak into the room?*

If it were only me, I would have, but since I won't be holding your hand nonstop— unless of course you'd like me to— he'd purred with a sexy smile and a glance in the direction of the shower, *it's simpler this way. More convenient for you.*

He'd pushed her toward the bathroom, told her he would return in one hour, then vanished.

After he'd gone, she'd suffered a momentary, nearly

immobilizing flash of panic— what if the Hunters somehow managed to find her while he was gone?— but it dissipated swiftly, leaving her astonished to realize that she truly trusted him to keep her safe, at least from everything besides himself.

After raiding the wet bar for snacks, she'd taken an inquisitive peek inside the bathroom and begun stripping where she stood, leaving her dirty clothes in a pile outside the bathroom door. She'd lingered in the marble shower for twenty glorious minutes, letting the three steaming, jetting pulses— one above, one on each side— work magic on her cramped, sore muscles.

Now, slipping into a thick, downy-soft, white courtesy robe, she stepped out into the bedroom.

Her gaze fell on the bed. The only bed. Looked like she'd be sleeping on the pullout sofa.

He'd kissed her.

Out of the blue and without warning. Grabbed her by the shirt, yanked her close, and lowered that sinfully sexy mouth to hers. And when he'd done it, her lips had been slightly parted. (Okay, so maybe she'd parted them a teeny bit more at the last moment.) She'd expected him to take advantage of it, to thrust his tongue deep, to take her in a demanding, hungry, hot, and slippery kiss. She'd expected a full assault on her senses. She'd expected that kiss to escalate into a hot, steamy make-out session.

Not.

A chaste little kiss. Hardly even a kiss at all. Not that she would have *invited* his kisses, but— since he'd gone ahead and taken one and she was already damned for permitting it— was it too

much to ask that he commit to it? Exercise a little follow-through?

But no, he'd just stood there, not even really touching her except for the handful of shirt he was holding (and he hadn't even tried to cop a feel of her breast while his hand was right over it; what kind of man passed up such an opportunity?), cocooning her in that erotic, spicy scent of jasmine and sandalwood, brushing his full, sexy lips against hers so lightly that it had made her want to scream. Or bite him.

That tiny little touch, that thing that hardly even qualified as a kiss, had left her feeling hot and achy and miserable.

She'd just stood there, dazed, looking up at him. knowing she should have put up at least a token fight, for heaven's sake!

Wishing he'd do it again. The right way.

And, damn it, he'd known exactly what effect he'd had on her; the pure masculine satisfaction in his eyes had been unmistakable.

With a little growl of irritation, she rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand and forced her mind away from that abysmal, aggravating, humiliating kiss, to what she'd learned over a pilfered lunch on the train.

Which wasn't much. No one could ever accuse Adam Black of overdisclosing. He either didn't like to talk to humans about Faery, or he didn't like to talk to *her* about Faery, because she'd had to pull teeth to get anything out of him at all. And what she'd gotten was, she figured, not even the tip of the iceberg.

The beautiful, scarred, copper-haired Fae she'd seen was Darroc, a High Council Elder and an ancient nemesis of Adam's.

He believed Darroc had armed the Hunters with human weapons to make his death look like an accident, as if he'd inadvertently gotten caught in a spray of mortal gunfire. He believed Darroc was planning an attempt to usurp the queen's power and, as they'd ever been on opposing sides, was taking advantage of the opportunity to get Adam out of the way once and for all.

And that was the sum total of what she'd managed to learn. He'd refused to tell her what plan he had for saving them, only that he did, indeed, have one. He'd refused to discuss why he and Darroc despised each other so greatly, though when he'd spoken of him his deep voice had resonated with fury, forcing her to finally admit that part of what she'd been raised to believe was simply wrong: Fae *did feel* emotion.

She could no longer deny it anymore. The evidence was right there in front of her eyes, and the *brehon* in her could not ignore evidence no matter how much she might like to. She could no longer tell herself that he was experiencing feelings because he was in human form and subject to the human condition. No. Adam and Darroc had hated each other for millennia, she'd heard it in his voice, and hate was emotion. Strong, deep emotion. Emotion he'd experienced in his Tuatha Dé form.

The O'Callaghan *Books* clearly said, as Grain had confirmed, that Fae were incapable of any emotion. Large or small. That they were cold, icy, arrogant, unfeeling. Nor was there any mention of politics or feuds or any of those human-sounding things going on in Faery— as if the Fae were actually very much like humans. How could the books have been so wrong?

Gee, maybe because they were written by the O'Callaghans

who'd escaped the Fae. By-ancestors who never interacted with one, never even spoke with one. Would you believe the report of an investigator who'd never even interviewed his subject? Present such a shoddy bit of "proof" in a case? The prosecution would have a field day with it!

Oh, such thoughts were shaking her foundation at the very core. She blew out a gusty breath.

Try to see past your preconceptions, Irish, would you? he'd said.

Damn it all, he was blasting through them, one by one.

* * *

After she dried her hair, Gabby used the hotel phone to check her messages at home. Her mom had called four times to remind her that she'd promised to fly out to California for her stepsister's graduation next weekend, and she'd really like to talk to her before then.

Gabby sighed. She hardly even knew her stepsiblings. In fact, she had been to California only twice in the past five years and couldn't understand why it was suddenly so important to her mom that she attend a stupid high-school graduation. But lately her mom seemed to be coming up with all kinds of excuses to get Gabby to fly out for a visit.

She may not be perfect, but she's the only mother you're ever going to have. You need to give her a chance, Gram had said a hundred times.

I gave her a chance. I was born to her. That's a chance. She left.

Gabby, you need to try to see things from her—

No.

As she sat in a hotel room in Atlanta, she could still hear her mom's voice from all those years ago as clearly as if she were seven again, awakened by a need to go to the bathroom, standing in her nightgown at the top of the stairs in the drafty, winter-chilled house, clutching a tattered stuffed unicorn, clinging to the caned post in the dark.

She's fascinated by them! She thinks they're beautiful and wants to go live with them!

She's a child, Jilly. She'll grow out of it.

Then, you'll have to help her grow out of it, because I can't. I can't deal with this.

That night, had her vision been an appendage she could have hacked off with a knife, she would have. *Stay, Mommy. I'll be good. I promise. I don't mean to see them.*

Gabby squeezed her eyes shut. Inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly.

Then glanced at the clock and picked up the phone. It was dinner-time in California; her mom would be at work at Trio's, the restaurant she managed.

She dialed the home number, to get the answering machine.

She left a terse message explaining that something had come up and she wouldn't be able to attend the graduation, but she'd send a gift and call in a few weeks. Feeling guilty, as she usually did where her mom was concerned, she added, "Maybe I can fly out for Christmas this year, okay?"

Assuming she was still alive.

* * *

Outside the suite. Adam sat with his back against the door, shifting restlessly, impatient for a shower himself, and to further Gabrielle's seduction.

They could have slept on the train, in a passenger compartment with bath and bath, but he wanted her to taste more of the life he could give her, even without his full powers. Seduction required the appropriate stage, and luxury always made a splendid one. Besides, he wanted to do a bit of "shopping." Trust would be a hard thing to win from her, but he could and would begin binding her to him this night with sex and gifts—those were his strengths, the things he could give better than any other man.

He knew she liked the suite. He'd seen it in her eyes. He'd seen also her instant wariness when her gaze had fallen on the only bed. He'd removed himself for a time to give her a chance to acclimate, wanting her shower-wanned and relaxed, her guard

down (in as much as she would ever drop her guard) when he returned.

A glance down the hall at the clock above the elevators told him it would be soon: fifty-two minutes down, eight to go.

Though he was certain they were safe stopping— the four Hunters Gabby had seen would have a hard time tracking them in modern cities with their millions of inhabitants and confusing man-made scents, and could only cover so much ground— he wasn't about to leave her alone.

Now that he was sifting place again— despite the tangle he'd left in Kentucky and all the Fae-residue in Cincinnati— he guessed they had a full day, at most two, before Darroc arrived in the general vicinity. Which was an acceptable risk, for by morning they would be gone. But this night, this one stolen night, would be his first.

Then he would implement the plan he'd formulated on the train.

It was now imperative he secure an audience with Aoibheal. She had to be apprised that Darroc had brought forth *her* Hunters from the Unseelie realm, something not only forbidden but costly to do, as the Hunters were mercenary to the core and handsomely retained by Aoibheal in exchange for powers and privileges.

Adam knew of only one thing Darroc might have promised them to turn them from the queen's service. The one thing the Hunters knew Aoibheal would never give them: freedom from their realm of shadow and ice. A return to the old ways.

Which meant that Darroc was planning an attempt to

overthrow the queen, and soon. And Adam had no doubt that, should Darroc come to power, not only would The Compact be immediately voided, the Unseelie would be freed and it would be war between the realms. Man would be plunged into a Dark Age the likes of which they'd not seen in millennia.

He could no longer afford to waste time waiting for Circenn to resurface. It was no longer a case of him seeking an audience merely because he was fed up with his punishment. The queen was in danger, his *Sidhe-seer* was in danger, the future of all the realms was in jeopardy, and he was going to have to *force* Aoibheal to appear.

When she'd first made him human, he'd toyed with this idea initially but had decided against it. Not only had he lacked the intermediary necessary to make it work, he knew the queen's fury would know no bounds if he did such an unthinkable thing.

But now, he thought darkly, he had a reason. Faery was doing precisely what he'd always suspected it would do without him—falling apart.

In the morning, they would leave for Scotland.

And there, on the first day of August, on the feast of Lughnassadh, a mere ten days hence, one way or another, by fair means or foul, Adam would do the unthinkable.

A thing no other Tuatha Dé in existence would ever even consider doing.

The queen would be incensed at first, but upon realizing why he'd done it, upon discovering Darroc's treachery, she would be pleased and grateful. She would swiftly reinstate his power and restore his immortality. He probably wouldn't even have to

apologize (for things that he *shouldn't* have to apologize for anyway). And all would be well once more.

But tomorrow would be soon enough to contemplate such matters. Tomorrow would be all about becoming immortal and regaining his powers again.

Tonight— he spared another glance at the clock, his dark face lighting with a smile to see that her hour was up— tonight was all about being as human as a man could possibly be.

* * *

"Are you ready to shop, *ka-lyrra*?"

Gabby blinked and turned toward the door. Adam stood in the doorway to the living room, leaning against the doorjamb, wearing only a towel. She looked hastily away. But it was too late, the image was burned into her mind. Wet, glossy black hair slicked back from his face, magnificent chest and arms, powerful legs. Itty-bitty towel. Eternally present heavy bulge lifting said itty-bitty towel.

A tiny, dreamy sigh escaped her. She camouflaged it hastily with a cough.

"I didn't hear you come back," she said stiffly, fixing her gaze on the TV. She'd been sitting in the living room, flipping stations, waiting for him to return. Unable to bear the thought of pulling

duty, smelly jeans back on over her clean skin, she'd hand-washed her clothes in the tub, hoping they'd be dry by morning. Now she was seriously regretting it. She needed more than a robe on around him. She needed a full suit of armor. And so did he, she thought peevishly. How dare he just saunter about flaunting all that golden, muscular, masculine splendor?

"I sifted directly into the shower."

"There's another robe in the bathroom," she informed him tightly.

"I know. I ripped it down the back when I tried to put it on. Men aren't built like me in your century, are they?"

Oh, for heaven's sake, Greek gods aren't built like you, she thought irritably.

"Come," he repeated, joining her by the sofa and tugging her up by a hand. "Let's go."

Taking a deep breath, she stood and forced herself to look directly into his face, denying herself even the tiniest skimming glance over his body. His gaze met hers, then dropped to the cleavage at her lapel. He wet his lip and gave her a slow smile, white teeth flashing in his dark face. The pink tip of his tongue danced against his teeth for a moment, sexy and playfully inviting.

"What are we shopping for?" Oh, God, she thought dismally, had that been *her* breathy voice? Had the fourteen-year-old part of her psyche taken over control of her vocal cords?

"Clothing, unless you're comfortable wearing nothing but that robe for the next few days," he said silkily. "I'm certainly fine with it."

She cleared her throat. "Shop. Now. Let's go."

He closed his hands possessively on her waist. His dark head fell forward and with his lips but a breath from hers, he said, "Where? Gucci? Versace? Macy's? What would you like, Gabrielle? What can I give you? I would deny you nothing."

His touch was scorching, even through the fabric of her robe, and she could feel his fingers toying with her belt. He smelled good, too, of soap and spice and sexy man. She was excruciatingly aware of her nudity beneath the robe. And of his. Her heart began to pound erratically. "Macy's is fine," she said hastily.

"Is there anything else you want?" he said softly. "Anything at all?"

She closed her eyes. "Gee, let's see, could you get out of my life and fix everything you've screwed up?"

He laughed and sifted place.

She thought she heard a "never" just before she was deconstructed. The next thing she knew she was standing, in her robe and bare feet, in the dark, locked offices of Macy's.

"What are we doing here?" she asked, staring blankly at dozens of computers and monitoring screens.

"Unless you want to hold my hand while you're trying things on, *ka-lyrra*. I'm deactivating the security cameras so you don't show up on than. I may not have to worry about it, but you do."

Heavens, he thought of everything, taking measures to protect her future, as if he had no doubt that she would survive their current nightmare and *have* a future. Assuming she did, the last

thing she wanted was to be caught on Macy's security cameras. Surviving the Fae, only to end up prosecuted for shoplifting, would be too ironic. Not to mention the havoc a criminal record would wreak with her career plans.

A few minutes later, apparently satisfied with his work, he transferred them into the main part of the store. She was relieved to discover that their unique mode of travel was no longer making her feel quite so nauseated.

"Stay here," he said, then vanished. He was back in a moment, holding two large leather satchels in his hands. From Gucci, no less. "I'll be nearby. We leave for Scotland tomorrow. Gather what you require. And, Gabrielle, the weather is different there; the nights get cool in the Highlands this time of year."

"Sc-Sc-Sc—" she sputtered, but he was gone again. *Scotland? The Highlands?* What on earth for? Damn it, what was he planning? And why hadn't he told her? How dare he just drag her all over the world without letting her in on their plans. Key phrase there being "their plans." It was her life too.

She stood for a moment, befuddled and pissed off, then with a brisk shake of her head decided to focus on the task at hand. Later she would confront him and insist on full disclosure. Right now she just wanted more clothing on. Fast. Those few moments of being in his arms while they'd both been so nearly nude had been a test of self-discipline she'd very nearly failed. Every ounce of her body had ached to melt into those strong arms. To run her tongue down that hard, muscled chest and over those sexy rippled abs. To maybe even slip her hand beneath his towel and find out if he really was as huge— *oooh*— she *had* to stop thinking like that!

She glanced around, trying to absorb the fact that she was in

Macy's after hours, undetectable, with apparent *carte blanche*. Distantly, embarrassingly distantly, her conscience squawked. She silenced it by reasoning that if later she felt guilty, she could always send an anonymous donation, and headed off to explore all the fashions she'd never been able to afford.

In the end, however, she eschewed high-price couture and settled for things that made sense. The slinky designer dress with the sexy spiked heels that made her sigh so wistfully would only be perceived by him as an invitation, and, really, who knew how many more lakes she might be dunked in?

So into her satchel went instead a dozen panties; three bras; jeans; sweats to sleep in; shirts, socks, sweaters; cosmetics and assorted toiletries; two belts; and— her only concession to temptation— a gorgeous fleece-lined suede jacket that seemed very Highland-ish to her.

But apart from that single expensive item, she stayed away from the high-dollar racks. Luxury was all well and good for a Fae prince, but what would she do with a pair of six-hundred-dollar Gucci boots? She'd be afraid to walk in them. Probably trip and break an ankle or something, and wasn't there some old fairy tale about stolen shoes that punished the thief? She knew better than most people that fairy tales had a twisted way of coming true.

She slipped into jeans and laced up tennis shoes. A sturdy pair of hiking boots went into the satchel.

She was done before he was. Figured. And when he returned, he was wearing dark, tattooed Armani jeans, with a sheer white silk tee and six-hundred-dollar Gucci boots.

Which also figured.

A week ago dinner would have been leftover pizza of indeterminate age fished from her barren fridge at home, by herself, while brooding about her nonexistent love life.

Tonight it was dinner from Bacchanalia in a sumptuous suite via invisible carryout, with a dinner companion who was the stuff of fairy tales. Literally.

Sitting across the elegant dining table from a tall, dark, Armani-clad fairy prince. Gabby stuffed herself on buttery lobster, pasta, and salad, followed by chocolate cheesecake and strawberries with champagne. Heavenly. Normally she'd have counted calories (she probably would have still eaten it all, but at least she'd have counted), but since she had no way of knowing how short her life might be at this particular juncture, she wasn't about to deprive herself in whatever remained of it.

She was just about to open her mouth to demand to know, in detail, what his plans were when he said softly:

"Why are you still a virgin, *ka-lyrra*?"

She blinked, an instinctive "it's none of your business" springing to the tip of her tongue, but just as swiftly bit it back. Perhaps if she answered some of his questions he'd be more responsive to hers. Besides, he was part of the reason her love life sucked, and it would feel good to get it off her chest. It

wasn't as if she could complain to her girlfriends about the misery of being a *Sidhe-seer*. "In case you haven't noticed. I have a big fat handicap."

His dark brows drew together in a frown and his gaze swept her. "I see none. What kind of handicap?"

She pushed her chair back, tucking her feet up beneath her. "Duh. I see fairies."

"Ah. How is that a handicap?"

"I want a normal life. I want an average, everyday, full life. That's all I've ever wanted. A husband, a job I'm passionate about, and children I want the dream. Happily-Ever-After and all."

"So, how does your seeing those of my race hinder that?"

She gave a gusty little sigh. "I've had two serious relationships in my life. Each time it got to the point that I was ready to get intimate, all I could think was that if I got pregnant, my child would most likely see fairies too. Which I'm okay with, I can live with that. The problem is, could the man in my life? Do I tell him I see a world he can't see? And that I'll have to protect our children from it? And that he's powerless to help? Or do I withhold that information and deal with it, if and when it becomes an issue, and hope it never does?" She smiled faintly, bitterly. "I told my last boyfriend the truth. I decided it was the only honorable thing to do, and that if he really loved me, he'd be able to handle it. Do you know what happened?"

Adam shook his head, his dark gaze unnervingly intent.

"First he thought I was joking. Then when I kept trying to make him understand— I even showed him the *Books of the Fae*— he

completely freaked out. When I wouldn't drop it, when I wouldn't say that I was kidding, when my 'delusion persisted to manifest itself,' as he so charmingly put it, he told me I'd been working too hard and needed professional help. Shortly after that he dumped me. By E-mail, no less, the breakup choice of spineless, sniveling cowards. I tried calling but he wouldn't answer. I left messages, he wouldn't return them; he blocked my E-mail address; he wouldn't even answer his door. We'd known each other for three years and had been dating for half of that. He's a law student in my program. One of my girlfriends told me last week he was telling our mutual friends that I had a nervous breakdown."

"You didn't love him," Adam said flatly.

"What?" She was startled, wondering how he'd determined that so swiftly and matter-of-factly.

"You didn't love him. I've been— seen mortals in love, grieving someone they lost. You're not one."

With a faint, wry smile. Gabby conceded the point. "You're right. I wasn't crazy, head-over-heels in love with him. But I cared about him. A lot. And it still hurts."

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

She shrugged. "I can't say I didn't know what to expect going in. O'Callaghan women never have successful relationships. My dad left my mom when I was four. I hardly even remember him. Just a vague memory of a man with a scratchy beard and a loud, angry voice. The only reason my mom's second marriage works is because she can't see fairies and she never had any more children. Her husband has no clue that she's anything other than perfectly normal. And as long as I stay out of the picture,

he never will. Gram never married. She settled for the children part of her dream. Got pregnant and didn't tell the father. It's not like ancient times when *Sidhe-seers* were revered and men fought for their hands. In my time, people don't believe in things they can't see. And me? I saw my first fairy, so Grain told me, when I was three years old. I pointed and smiled at it. Fortunately, it was Grain who'd taken me out in the stroller that day, because if Mom had, she wouldn't have even known what I was looking at and I probably would have been captured then. That was when they knew for sure that, though the vision skipped my mom, it hadn't skipped me. I didn't get to leave the house again until I was ten years old. It was that long before Gram was convinced I could go out without betraying myself."

Adam leaned back in his chair, watching her across the table. He'd begun this conversation with his question about why she was still a virgin, intending to turn her mind to sex and smoothly segue into seduction. But she'd ended up turning his mind away from it, toward different thoughts of her. He'd not considered what being a *Sidhe-seer* might mean for a twenty-first-century woman.

It was not so different from the old crone's life in the isolated forest, as he'd thought. It still meant hiding, and not just from the Fae but from her own kind too. It meant a life of never quite fitting anywhere. She was right, what man would believe her? And, assuming any did, what man would tolerate such an affront to his masculinity— being unable to protect his own?

She'd actually been making quite a valiant stab at things: building a career, dating, and keeping the Tuatha Dé oblivious to her existence.

Until he'd come along and exploded through her back door,

betraying her to the worst denizens of Faery.

"When I'm immortal again. I'll fix everything for you, *ka-lyrra*. You'll never have to fear again."

She wrinkled her nose as if to say 'Yeah, right'. "Speaking of which, what is your plan? If you're going to be dragging me all over the world, I think I have a right to know what we're doing."

He shook his head. "The less you know for now, the safer you are. If by some chance you're taken from me, my plan may be the only way I have of getting you back."

She shivered, paling. "You mean if the Hunters get me, don't you?"

Adam nodded. "Yes. Knowledge you don't possess can't be lifted from your mind by another of my race. Wait until we're in Scotland. I'll tell you there."

She shivered again. "Okay. But can you at least tell me where in Scotland we're going?"

"To sacred ground, where those of my race are forbidden to go. MacKeltar land. We'll be safe there."

"So I take it we're not going to try to find this Circenn Brodie person any longer?"

Adam watched her intently as he replied, "I can no longer wait for my son to resurface."

"Y-your w-*what*?" she sputtered, looking at him with an astonished expression.

"My son. Circenn is my son."

She sat up straight in her chair, frowning. "You mean, by a human woman? That's why he's only half-Fae? You had a child with a *human woman*?"

He nodded, concealing his smile behind a swallow of wine. She sounded both offended and... reluctantly fascinated. Fascinated was good, very good. Precisely what he wanted to hear.

"When? Recently?"

"Long ago, *ka-lyrra*."

"*How* long ago? And stop making me pull teeth, Adam. I answered your questions. If you expect me to answer any more of them, you'd better start talking to me."

She looked as if she were about to leap up from her chair, grab him by the shoulders, and shake him. He might have antagonized her further, to goad her into doing it for the excuse to pull her into his arms, but he was too charmed by the fact that she'd just called him "Adam." Though she'd said his name on other occasions, this was the first time she'd used it so casually in conversation. He'd been waiting for it to happen. It was a milestone, revealing a deepening acceptance of him. He was no fool; he knew he'd been an "it" to her at first. Then the *sin siriche du*, or the blackest fairy, then his full name. Adam Black.

But now he was just Adam. He wondered if she had any idea what she'd just betrayed.

"Circenn was born in 811 AD," he told her. "He lived in his time until the early 1500s, when he met a woman from your century. They now live in your time."

Her eyes widened. "I don't think I even want to know how that

happened. It would just give me a headache."

She was silent a moment and Adam fancied he could almost see questions whizzing behind her green-gold eyes as she pondered which one to ask next. He was pleased by what she chose.

"So does that mean any children you have are also immortal, even if they're only half-fairy? Not that I personally care," she added hastily. "I was just thinking it might be interesting to add to our books."

The only person who would be adding anything to those idiotic books was him; it was time the O'Callaghans got a few things right. "No, Gabrielle, only a full-blooded Tuatha Dé is born immortal. I gave my son an elixir that my race created so we could grant select humans immortality." She didn't need to know that he'd done it without his son's knowledge or consent. Or that Circenn had hated him when he'd found out what he'd done. Had, in fact, spent most of the next six centuries or so refusing to speak to him, refusing to acknowledge him as his father. His son could hold a grudge with the best of immortals.

"You can make people *immortal*?" she said faintly. "As in, they live forever?"

"Yes. I made his wife immortal too." How long ago had that been? He'd been tripping around in time so much of late that many centuries had passed for him, but for her— three mortal years or so? A distant shadow clouded his mind at the thought. The elixir of life had a particularly unsavory side effect; one he'd told neither Circenn nor Lisa about. Half-Fae children were born with souls (apparently half a dose of humanity was enough to merit the divine), and Circenn, with his more tenacious constitution, had a few more centuries before it would happen. It took roughly a millennium to affect a half-Fae. Pure humans,

on the other hand, like Lisa, lasted but a few years. Lisa had little time left at all. The golden glow illumining her would soon sputter out, leaving her as void of a soul as any Fae.

"Did you make Circenn's mother immortal too?"

Abruptly Adam wanted out of the conversation. Pushing himself up from the table, he began bagging up leftovers. What food remained they would eat in the morning before catching a plane. He wanted an early start. "No."

"So she's dead?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you offer her— "

"I did," he ground out, cutting her off.

"And?"

"And Morganna wouldn't take it."

"Oh." Her eyes narrowed, then widened, as if something had just occurred to her. "When did Morganna die?"

"What the bloody hell does that have to do with anything?" he snarled.

She eyed him warily but persisted, "When?"

Adam shoved the last tray of pasta back in a bag. It burst through the other end. Irritably, he folded the paper over it and shoved it under an arm. "In 847."

She was silent a long, reflective moment, then, "Why wouldn't she— "

He shot her a savage glare, eyes narrowed, teeth bared.
"Enough. My life is not an open O'Callaghan Book, *Sidhe-seer*, to flip through as you wish and make all manner of bloody idiotic interpretations. The Tuatha Dé do not speak of Tuatha Dé matters to"— he gave her an icy sneer— "mere mortals."

"Well, mister-mere-mortal-yourself," she bristled right back at him, "maybe you'd better get used to it, because whether or not you like it, you need at least one of us 'mere mortals' to help you become a pompous-asshole-fairy-thing again."

He tried to maintain his icy stare, but his lips curved despite his efforts and he shook with silent laughter. A pompous-asshole-fairy-thing. The indignity of it. Had any of his race ever been called such a thing? Nothing cowed the woman. Nothing. "Point made, *ka-lyrra*," he said dryly. As he gathered the bags and turned to head for the kitchen, he added over his shoulder. "For the record, I've just told you more than I've told any other human in a very long time."

"How long?" The moment she said it, Gabby wanted to kick herself. But she wanted to know. Wanted to know who the last woman... er, human, was who had truly known Adam Black.

He stopped and turned back to look at her.

When his obsidian gaze met hers, Gabby suddenly felt a little chill in her blood. Sometimes he looked so human, while at others there was a frightening incongruity to his face, as if something terrifyingly old and completely inhuman were looking out at her from behind a Halloween mask of a youthful human face. And for a brief, strange moment she had the feeling that, were she to somehow lift that mask, she might find something very much like a... like a Hunter beneath it.

He made a small sound then, a tired sound. Not a sleepy sound, but an immortally weary one. Then he tinned and resumed walking away.

She heard the refrigerator door open and close. Then silence. Then his deep, rich bun-floated softly through the suite. "Since 847, Gabrielle."

* * *

It was one in the morning by the time Gabby pulled out the sofa bed, still mulling over what Adam had revealed. She'd not missed the significance of the dates. Morganna had died mid-ninth century, had refused his offer of immortality and, right around that time, Adam Black had been seen by not just O'Callaghans but oodles of others, on a violent rampage through the Highlands.

Over Morganna?

Had Adam Black gone into a rage when he'd lost her? And if so, why had he permitted her to die? He'd been all-powerful; he could have forced her to stay alive, forced her to take his "elixir of life" (which was a mind-boggling concept in and of itself!).

Who *was* Morganna? What had she been like? Why had she refused it? How long had Adam spent with her? Had she lived her whole life with him? Woken up each morning with a Fae prince beside her in bed? Been spoiled every day by his crazy

excesses, gone to sleep sated each night in his arms?

What had been so special about her that he'd tried to make her immortal?

"I could really hate that woman," she muttered beneath her breath.

Adam Black had had a relationship with a mortal woman, fathered a son with her, tried to make her live forever.

And Gabby was feeling... oh, for heaven's sake, she thought, exasperated, jealous. Envious that *she* kept denying herself, but Morganna hadn't. No. Morganna had taken what he offered, plunged right into it, taken all of it. *She'd* touched him and kissed him and gone to bed with him. *She'd* played with all that silky dark hair, felt it sweeping over her naked body. *She'd* tasted gold-velvet fairy skin, had sizzling hot fairy sex with him. Even borne his son.

And when she died, he'd razed the Highlands. In his grief? Or had it merely been the petulance of a child denied his favorite toy?

Who cares? I wouldn't mind being that man's favorite toy for a lifetime, a teenage voice cooed dreamily. Beats the hell out of the boyfriends you keep picking. Why settle for normal when you could have a life full of fairy tail?

"Shut up," she muttered "I'm having a hard enough time without you tossing your two cents' worth in. And spare me the juvenile puns."

Scowling, she punched the pillows, plumped them, then snapped the blanket out, spreading it over the sofa bed. She'd just gotten it arranged when he came up behind her, slipped his

hands around her waist, and pulled her back against him, her shoulders to his rib cage. The heat of his big body scorched her thorough her clothing and she could taste his exotic spicy scent on each shallow breath she drew.

"Did you never wonder, Gabrielle?" he said softly, ducking his mouth close to her ear.

"Wonder what?" she managed, holding very, very still. He'd left just a tiny bit of space between their lower bodies, a tantalizing, tempting amount of space. She would *not* let her traitorous body bridge it. Would not let herself lean into him. searching with her bottom for that rock-hard arousal he always had. She realized then, with a bit of a start, that she *liked* that he was always hard around her. She'd grown accustomed to his incessant seduction. It was a heady thing, to know that the *sin siriche du* was so turned on by her. And the fact that he was so turned on fed her own desire. Being the focus of such intense lust from such an intensely beautiful man/ fairy was the most potent of aphrodisiacs.

God, he was dangerous. But she'd known that from the beginning. He'd come packaged with O'Callaghan warning labels: *Avoid contact at all cost*. Didn't get much clearer than that.

"In all your years of watching us, of being forbidden to look at us, and having to pretend you couldn't see us, did you never wonder what it would be like to touch one of us?" He slid his hands slowly up from her waist, and she knew he was giving her time to pull away, wagering that she wouldn't, and God help her, she knew she should, but she couldn't seem to get enough breath to do so. Her heart was pounding like a sledgehammer against the wall of her chest.

There was a long tense moment where neither of them moved or spoke.

Abruptly, he filled his hands with her breasts.

The breath she'd been trying to gather exploded from her lungs in a hiss. Her skin sizzled beneath the fabric of her shirt, as nerve endings arched to instant, insatiable life. She could only imagine how incredible it would feel to have his bare hands on her bare skin; those big, strong blacksmith hands all over her body. With that extra brush of Fae he had, she fancied she might go up in flames from the sheer erotic heat of it.

He made an edgy sound that was so animalistic and full of sexual hunger that her knees nearly buckled, and she swayed for a moment. His grip tightened on her breasts, causing her to draw in a long ragged inhalation, but he didn't offer her the full support of his body; he still kept himself, from the waist down, that slight, provocative distance away. "You have beautiful breasts, *ka-lyrra*. I've been wanting to fill my hands up with these since the moment I saw you. Plump and full and soft and..." he trailed off with a little purring noise deep in his throat.

Gabby closed her eyes; her breasts felt tight in his hands, swelling from his touch. His unshaven jaw rasped against her hair, then against her cheek as he nudged aside her hair. The sleek wet heat of his tongue traced a velvety trail down the side of her neck, sending shivers of sensual delight skittering up her spine. She was going to pull away, to stop him. Any minute now...

"Did you never fantasize about us? Tell me you didn't. Say. 'No. Adam. I never even thought about it once.' " He laughed huskily, wickedly, as if endlessly amused by the thought, his

thumbs tracing light circles on her breasts, just beneath her nipples, on the soft underside where she was so sensitive. Her nipples were so hard they were poking through both her bra and her shirt, hungry for touch.

He closed his fingers on the puckered peaks at the precise moment that he bit down on the nape of her neck, and she clenched her teeth to keep from crying out. He knew, damn him, he *knew*. Her secret fantasies, the inner, eternal battle she waged. He knew all about it.

"Why so quiet? Why won't you say it, Gabrielle?" A pause. "Because you did think it. Many times." A sleek glide of his tongue down her neck. Another gentle nip on the tender, sensitive cord that ran from her neck to her shoulder, making her whole body shiver with desire. A delicious light pinch on her nipples. "Is it so hard to admit? I know you did. You wondered what it would be like for one of us to take you to bed. To strip you naked and make you come so many times that you couldn't even move. To give you so much pleasure that it left you limp and exhausted, unable to do anything but lay there while your Fae lover fed you from his hands, tended you, and rebuilt your strength so he could do it to you again and again. So he could ride you slow and deep, take you fast and hard from behind. So he could lift you astride him and feel you shudder on top of him when you came. So he could lick and taste and kiss every inch of your body until nothing else existed, until all else ceased to matter but what he was doing to you, the completion only he could give you."

She was panting softly. Damn him. She'd imagined all those things and more. And his words were painting much too vivid pictures in her mind's eye: Adam doing all those things to her. Being lifted astride him; on her hands and knees for him as he

thrust into her from behind...

God, she thought feverishly, had she *always* been picturing him? Try though she might, she couldn't recall the face of the dream prince that she'd so lovingly detailed in her teen fantasies. Either he'd blasted it right out of her memories, replacing her imaginary lover with *his* dark eyes, *his* hard body, *his* seductive voice and devastating touch, or it had always been him.

Pull away, O'Callaghan, you know this will get you nothing but screwed— and not just physically, the inner, very faint voice of reason warned.

Right, in just a minute...

"You fantasized," he continued, his voice low and hypnotic. "You may be virgin in body, but not in mind. I feel the heat and passion in you; there's a fury of it inside you. I felt it the moment I saw you. You're not normal. You'll never be normal. Give it up. Stop trying to fit in a world that will never accept you. Nobody can understand you the way I can. You're a *Sidhe-seer*. You want to spend your whole life denying it? What you see. What you are. What you want. Sad way to live and die."

There was silence for a moment while he just held her, hands gone still on her breasts, breath warm against her neck, unmoving.

She knew this was her moment to rescue herself. To rage at him. To tell him he was wrong, that he didn't know the first damn thing about what he was talking about.

But she couldn't, because he did.

Everything he'd said was true. She wasn't normal, and no

matter what she did, she would never be normal. She'd been torn between worlds all her life, trying to ignore the one and fit into the other— both equally futile ventures— wondering if all there would be for her in the end was the kind of life Gram had lived. A baby, no husband, a big empty house. Telling herself it would be enough, if that was what had to be. In the meantime, giving it her best shot, trying to make things work with a boyfriend.

But no boyfriend had ever been able to compete with the fantastic Fae males she'd been seeing since childhood. No human boyfriend had ever been able to vie with a world that was intrinsically so much hotter and brighter and more sensual. And not with any boyfriend had she ever truly been able to be herself. And the sad fact was, a large part of why she was still a virgin was because she didn't want a man. damn it. she wanted a fairy. She always had.

And she was tired of wondering what it would be like with one, of forcing herself to look away, to turn away, to never touch.

Tired of repressing all those sinfully seductive fantasies.

The silence stretched between them.

Abruptly one hand slipped from her breast and cupped her snugly, intimately, between her legs, grinding her bottom back against his erection.

An incoherent little cry burst from her throat.

He answered with a spate of words in an ancient, unfathomable tongue that tumbled with the rough vehemence of curses from his lips. Then in that ancient, exotically accented English of his, he growled:

"You wondered what it would be like to fuck a Fae. Well, here I am, Gabrielle. Here I am "

The last vestiges of her resistance eroded with his words.

Here I am.

Take me; do anything you want with me, in essence. And she wanted. Oh, God, did she want. She'd been wanting for a lifetime. Her fantasies about the Fae had always been basely sexual, and though she rarely used the f-word, on his lips, it was pure seduction. Something about the way his accent and deep burr shaped it made it sound, not harsh, but sexy and inviting, secret and forbidden and enticing. It didn't sound crude when he said it; it sounded like an invitation to dance a timeless dance that was innately earthy and animal, for which he would make no excuses and offer no apologies. Raw man, raw sex, was what he offered, in a world airbrushed into soft focus by his sheer beauty and seduction.

Of course, later, after the intense no-holds-barred-marathon-sex, her fantasy prince always fell for her in her dreams... but not until the frenzy of mating had been met. Not until lust's due had been paid. If it could ever be fully paid with a Fae.

She melted back against his body.

He sensed it instantly, the precise moment she yielded. He spoke in that strange tongue again, the masculine triumph in his voice unmistakable. She was lost and he knew it.

She expected him to turn her in his arms, crush her against him. but once again, he defied her expectations.

Hand still snug between her legs, pressing her relentlessly back against his hard-on, he splayed his other hand against her jaw and turned her head, guiding her lips to his. Standing behind her. he kissed her. She'd not have believed it possible to kiss at such an angle, but she'd never kissed anyone as tall as he was, and not only was it possible, it was bizarrely, intensely erotic. Dominant. Possessive. A kiss of branding and claiming. She was captured hard against his body, his big hand warm between her legs, his silky hair falling over her shoulder, his mouth sealing over hers.

She whimpered against his lips, but it was lost to the hot glide of his tongue, probing deep, retreating. Mating, escaping. Playing with her, dancing a slow, torturous, blatantly sexual dance.

Somewhere he'd learned— oh, probably a few thousand years ago, she thought with a tiny, almost hysterical bubble of laughter— exactly how much to give a woman before taking away, exactly how to keep a woman on a brittle desperate edge, merely with his kisses. The moment she melted into it, he would change it, take it some other way, give her less. Then come back for more the second she was about to scream. With him behind her. she had no control over the kiss. He had it all, and was exploiting it mercilessly. One hand on her face, one between her legs, holding her immobile while he tortured her with his lips.

Intense. breath-stealing. mind-numbing kisses, then gone. A soft, sultry brushing with that full lower, sulky lip of his, creating a delicious erotic friction that made her ache far more than it satisfied. More deep, toe-curling kisses, but not lasting

long enough...

And, oh, God, if he devoted the same languorous, teasing attention to all parts of a woman's body, she was never going to survive him. She'd be an incoherent mess before he even got to the important ones.

And speaking of the important ones, she thought peevishly, he could start moving his other hand anytime now. She wiggled in his implacable grip, trying to communicate the wordless message. She was so close, had been since the moment he'd slipped that big hand between her legs, hovel on the edge. If he'd just move his hand the tiniest bit!

But if he understood her silent plea, he chose to ignore it. His hand remained implacably there between her legs, keeping her excruciatingly aware of her warm, wet readiness, of that sensitive bud begging for friction, for even the smallest movement, but stayed mercilessly still. He had her trapped between two things that could bring her endless erotic pleasure, and was giving her nothing of them. Only the tantalizing promise, but nothing to ease the intolerable pressure building inside her.

Kisses. Slow and long, hot and hard. Tongue gliding satiny and sleek, tangling, withdrawing.

They were kisses to die for, she thought feverishly, trying to get more of him in her mouth, trying to suck his tongue deeper, refusing to release his lower lip when he pulled away with a soft laugh. She tried desperately to arch against his hand, but each time she managed to gain a tiny range of motion, he shifted his hand, backing off the pressure. Testy with impeded desire, she nipped at his lip.

"Bloody hell, Irish, you after blood? Trying to kill me?" he said with a soft, rough laugh.

"*Me?* Quit teasing! Kiss me deep! And anytime now you could move— "

He shushed her complaint with his kisses. Small laps, nibbles, kisses at the corners of her mouth, a long slow pull of her bottom lip. Deep again, then away. More torture. He kissed, she realized then, as perhaps only an immortal would. Kissed like a being that had all the time in the world, lazily but thoroughly, savoring every subtle nuance of pleasure, drawing it out, prolonging it. No clocks ticked in his world, no hours sped by. There was no work to get up for tomorrow, nothing more pressing than the passion of the moment. He existed as an immortal lost to immediacy, and being kissed with such in-the-now intensity was devastating. And she had a terrible suspicion that he might dole out the orgasms the same way— only letting her have one when he'd milked from her every bit of anticipation and need that he could.

She was drowning in sensation, the feel of his mouth on hers, the swollen hardness of him against her bottom, the heat of his big hand between her legs.

Then suddenly he broke the kiss and the hand cupping her jaw slid to her waist, raked up inside her shirt, and popped the clasp of her bra. He closed his big hand over one of her bare breasts. She shuddered in his arms, her body bucking forward against the hand between her legs.

"Adam," she gasped. "Move your hand!"

"Not yet." Coolly, unyielding.

"Please!"

"Not yet. Has any mortal man ever made you feel like this, Gabrielle?" he purred, a hint of savagery in that smooth deep voice. "Did any of your little boyfriends ever make you feel this way?"

"No!" The word exploded from her when his fingers closed abruptly on her nipple, pinching the hardened peak.

"No mortal can. Remember that, *ka-lyrra*, if you think to go back to your silly human boys. Do you know how many times, how many ways, I'm going to make you come?"

"I'd settle for just one if I could have it right now," she hissed, so intensely aroused that she was bordering on hostility. She'd never felt this way before, had no idea how to handle it.

Laughter spilled around her, husky, erotic, alien, dark, purely Adam Black.

"You aren't falling for me, are you, Irish?" he purred against her ear, that infernal hand finally moving up to toy with the button-fly of her jeans.

"Hardly," she forced out, her whole body straining with need as she waited breathlessly for his hand to slip inside her pants. With each button that popped, a tiny shudder shook her.

Her eyes fluttered closed and her head plopped limply back against his chest as his hand slid into her jeans and, palm to her skin, he pushed beneath her panties.

The moment his hand touched her bare skin her knees went out from under her.

As she stalled to go down, he snaked an arm tightly around her

waist, holding her up.

"Good. I'd hate to think you were falling for me."

She didn't miss the amusement in his voice, nor the absurd reality that she'd indeed just quite physically fallen, from a mere touch. And he hadn't even grazed her clitor—

"*Oooh!*" A *whoosh* of air escaped her and she didn't even bother trying to stand anymore, just let him have her weight. Dimly, she could hear him panting against her ear, his breathing rough and labored, as if he'd been running for a very long time. Her climax was right there, she was on it, about to go over...

"Christ, Gabrielle, you make me— "

"Well, now, isn't this pretty," a deep voice mocked. "Looks like she's primed and ready for me. I can't wait to finish what you've started. Remember how we used to do that, Adam? How you and I used to share? Or is that yet another of those things you like to pretend never happened along with those few thousand years you pretend you never lived? Does she know what we can do to her? Have you told her how we used to play with mortals?"

Gabby jerked violently in Adam's arms, that oh-so-desperately-needed orgasm dying an instant death, though none of the attendant arousal did. Her throat worked convulsively as the sardonic voice penetrated her sensual stupor. She tried desperately to shake it off, to speak through it, to warn Adam that Darroc had found them again, but her treacherous vocal cords had locked up on her every bit as completely as they had back on Fountain Square. She was frozen from head to toe, rooted in place.

As she stood, unable to manage even the smallest squawk of warning, she was stunned and relieved to realize that somehow he knew.

Yanking his hand from her jeans, he turned her roughly in his arms and pulled her against him, snarling viciously. "Bloody *hell*."

Gabby's eyes fixed with horror on the tall copper-haired Fae standing just beyond Adam's shoulder. Head tilted back, she stared up at Darroc.

Its iridescent eyes a cool shade of ice, it pursed perfect lips that held a twist of cruelty and blew her a mocking kiss over his shoulder.

Her mouth opened on a scream.

But they were already sifting.

* * *

They sifted place for hours.

At first she was still in such a sensual daze that she could hardly even think, didn't even bother trying to speak. Her whole body was caught in a suspended, painful state of erotic awareness that was taking much too long to dissipate.

Well, at least one part of the *Book of the Sin Siriche Du* had

been accurate, she brooded, the part about: *so sates a lass that she is oft incapable of speech, wits muddled.*

For not even fear for her life, it seemed, had much of a dampening effect on the storm of desire Adam had stirred in her.

Then again, she half-suspected she might be getting a little numb to fear; repeated exposure and all.

Still... the passion he'd awakened in her was like nothing she'd ever felt before. Nothing she'd ever thought possible to experience. Quite simply, being touched by Adam Black made her whole body feel gloriously, intensely, addictively alive.

It was just as she'd always feared: a few Fae kisses and a woman was lost.

And it wasn't as if she were a novice where kisses were concerned. She'd kissed a lot. In fact, she suspected she'd kissed a whole lot more than most women. Because she was a virgin and men were... well, men, her dates had put extraordinary effort into foreplay with her, each determined to be The One That Scored, like it was some kind of competition.

Hours of expert, seductive kissing, and she'd always seen her dates firmly to the door.

Yet after a few kisses from Adam, she'd not only been hovering absurdly close to orgasm, she'd been about to fall— literally— into bed, or rather on the floor, or any damn where he'd wanted her.

He was addictive. It had been bad enough looking at him and wondering what he would be like in bed, but now she had a clear idea, and she was never going to be able to look at him

again without thinking about it. In great detail. Now that she'd gotten a taste of him, she was finally able to put into words what she'd sensed about him from the very beginning, what had been wreaking havoc with her senses since day one: Adam Black was more man than most *men*.

He was strong and sensual and certain of himself, an uninhibited hedonist, every last glorious gold-velvet inch of him. He adored sex, savored it, everything about it. He was controlling, yet in a way that fed a woman's fantasies. He would be, she now knew, a whole lot dominant in bed and a little bit dirty. He would take her every way she'd ever imagined and. she was quite certain, a few-ways she probably hadn't.

He would be inventive and inexhaustible and utterly devoted to pleasure.

There was now no doubt in her mind that he *could* do as he'd said: leave her so limp, so dazedly and thoroughly sated that she'd not even be able to summon up the strength to feed herself, to lift her head from the pillow, or the floor, or wherever else he chose to leave her when he was done with her.

A woman could hurt herself on Adam Black in bed.

And out of it, O'Callaghan, that faint inner voice warned.

Oh, yes, she didn't bother arguing, *And out of it*. And that was something she needed to devote careful thought to, and not while he was touching her either. And she would, just as soon as things settled down a bit.

Not that she was making excuses for herself, but as crazy as her life had gotten, she was pretty much being forced to constantly react, not getting a chance to think things through and act.

She didn't need to dredge up one of Gram's many pertinent adages to understand what a dangerous way that was to live.

But, heavens, she thought, with droll exasperation, it would certainly help her think more clearly if she could just figure out what her odds of survival were. When one didn't know how much longer one might live, discipline and self-denial had a funny way of flying right out the window alongside calorie-counting.

It was quite some time before her body calmed from its wild fever-pitch arousal enough that she was able to relax in his arms while they sifted. Even then, she did it very carefully. Avoiding contact with that part of him that was still rock-hard and would only make her feel so miserably turned on again. She noticed that he, too, was trying to avoid contact for a change, and when she inadvertently brushed against him at one point, he made a harsh sound and snarled. "Don't *touch* that. It *hurts*. Christ, I'm not made of stone."

"Sorry," she said instantly, though inwardly an utterly feminine part of her beamed, delighted to know she wasn't the only one having such a hard time recovering. That she wasn't the only one their intimacy had affected so intensely. (And he certainly felt like he was made of stone, at least *there* anyway.)

She was shocked, sometime later, to find they were back in the hotel room, where Adam grimly snatched up their luggage. She opened her mouth to ask what in the world was so important that he'd risked returning for it— really, clothes and toiletries were eminently replaceable— but he'd sifted place again and she'd learned her lesson about keeping her mouth shut while doing so. (Fortunately they encountered no lakes on their itinerary this time; she was grateful they weren't near the coast,

materializing in shark-infested waters would have been way worse than being dunked with tadpoles.)

They continued sifting until she'd completely lost track of time, then boarded another passenger train.

Once on the train, he took a seat and pulled her down to sit between his legs, though maintaining space between their lower bodies. He drew her shoulders to his chest, wrapped his arms around her, and rested his jaw against her hair.

She was startled to realize he was shaking. It was almost imperceptible, but there was a deep tremor running through his powerful body.

"What's wrong, Adam?" she asked nervously. What could make Adam Black shake? Did she even *want* to know? Had she missed something? Were they still not safe yet, even after all their frenzied sifting?

"What's wrong?" he growled. "What's *wrong*? Bloody hell, I screwed up, that's what's wrong! Do you know how lucky we were that he let me see and hear him? If he hadn't, there's no telling what might have happened. Christ, I'm not used to this being-powerless shit; I'm no frigging good at it." A long pause, then a muffled oath. "I should never have stopped for the night, Gabrielle. I shouldn't have stopped until I had you in Scotland and knew you were safe. I was a bloody arrogant fool."

Arms snug around her, he lapsed into stony silence.

Gabby blinked and fell silent herself. Her heart did a dangerous little flip-flop inside her chest. *I was a bloody arrogant fool*, he'd said. Not words she'd ever expected to hear from your average imperious Fae.

But then, nothing about Adam was proving to be what she'd been raised to expect from the average imperious Fae.

And the line in her mind between man and fairy was getting ever more blurred.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back into him, telling herself to try to get some sleep while she could, because it was anyone's guess when or where she might get to sleep next.

She'd just begun to drift off into a light doze when he shook her gently; they disembarked and caught a shuttle to the airport.

"A flight's leaving now, *ka-lyrra*," he said, scanning departures. "There's no time for me to play with their computers and get you a ticket. You'll have to hold my hand. Come. We must hurry to catch it."

Scotland. They were going to Scotland. Right now.

Blinking, stupefied by what her life had become, she slipped her hand into his.

Invisible, they passed through security and made for the gate. She glanced up at his profile. His jaw was set, his eyes narrowed and focused straight ahead, and he was walking so fast that he was practically dragging her.

His pace didn't slow until they'd boarded the plane.

It was Monday, she thought with a kind of distant wonder as she sank into a window seat beside him, holding tightly to his hand.

She should be home, at work. She should be getting ready to make her stand with Jeff. She had dry cleaning to pick up, plants that needed to be watered, a dentist appointment this

afternoon, and dinner plans with Elizabeth tonight.

Instead she was on a plane, cloaked by the *féth fiada*, temporarily noncorporeal, about to fly halfway across the world, being chased by otherworldly demons, and half-seduced by an otherworldly prince. Would have— if she had to be brutally honest with herself— probably been wholly seduced, if not for the interruption of said otherworldly demons, and wouldn't *that* have made a fine mess of the already fine mess in her head?

It was a measure of how surreal her existence had become that, in the midst of all she could be worrying about, indeed, *should* be worrying about, her most prevalent concern was that she really, really hoped everyone had already boarded, and they would just stay in their own seats and not sit in her.

You were firing questions at me today, trying to get inside my head.

You asked if I believe in God.

I told you of course I do— I've always had a strong sense of self.

Your house is quiet now, you're sleeping upstairs and I'm alone with this blasted, idiotic book that purports to tally the sum of my life, and the fact is, maybe I do.

But maybe, ka-lyrra, your God doesn't believe in me.

— FROM THE (GREATLY REVISED) BLACK EDITION OF
THE O'CALLAGHAN *Book of the Sin Siriche Du*

Scotland. The Highlands.

In Adam's opinion, there was no finer place in all the world. He'd passed much of his existence spotting a human glamour amid her lush vales and rocky tors. He'd lived for a time, back in the seventh century, in the guise of a battle-scarred warrior, with a Highland clan called the McIlloch, eaten and "tooped" and fought beside them. And when one of their many battles had grown too fierce, he'd bequeathed a Fae gift upon the McIlloch males, saving their line from extinction.

He'd set up his smithy here and there, for a time at Dalkeith-Upon-the-Sea, for a time at Caithness, among too many other places to name. He'd infiltrated the Templars when they'd fallen, guiding them to Circenn at Dunnotar, to be used in battle by Robert the Bruce, and then to the Sinclair at Rosslyn, where to this day their fantastic legacy endured.

And the Keltar, well, he'd been fascinated by that Highland clan of Druids since the day they'd been chosen to negotiate and uphold The Compact with the Tuatha Dé, but he'd been especially fascinated by the twin MacKeltars, Dageus and Drustan— dark, powerful, sometimes barbaric— sixteenth-

century Highlanders who'd forsaken love, only to find it in the bleakest hours of their existence.

And now he was in human form, driving into those mountains at the side of a human woman, about to meet those very Keltar in the flesh.

What would they make of him? Would his reception be fair or foul? He was, after all, of the race that had made the Keltars' lives so difficult; one of those responsible for generations uncounted of MacKeltar being feared, touted as "pagan" and "evil" for continuing to adhere to the Old Ways when Gaul abandoned their Druids first to the Romans and then to the equally tender mercies of Christianity.

Would they know of him? Would his reputation have preceded him? Would Dageus have any memory of Adam healing him? The mighty Highlander's heart had stopped beating completely by the time Adam had knelt beside him on the Isle of Morar.

Would the Keltar, like Gabrielle, be reluctant to trust him? Reluctant to do what he needed them to do, or rather, *not* do?

Rubbing his jaw, he stared out the window of the rental car, forcing himself to put aside thoughts of whether those two would welcome or revile him— what mattered was that they'd crossed the queen's wards several leagues back, and Gabrielle was now on protected ground— he'd deal with whatever else came to pass. He'd spent most of the time in transit over the ocean mentally kicking his own ass for what had happened in Atlanta: Because he'd been so selfishly intent on seducing her, on binding her to him, he'd imperiled her life.

Stupid smug bastard; you re not invincible anymore.

Rather than winning her, he could have lost his *Sidhe-seer* in that hotel room forever. Her fragile, precious life could have been snuffed out, freeing her soul to go places he could never follow, not even with all his powers restored. Merely thinking about it made his human body start knotting up all over again. Bad thing about being human and having so much muscle was that all that muscle could get tense. He'd gotten his first headache on the plane. He had no desire to get another one. Ever. Nor did he appreciate the sick feeling in his stomach no quantity of food had managed to assuage. Nothing but holding her tightly had seemed to help.

Exhaling slowly, he forced his attention outward, to the countryside, a vista of which he never tired.

At that moment, the car veered sharply to the left, then back just as sharply, and Adam bit back a smile, knowing she'd probably hit him if she saw it. Gabrielle had insisted on driving (if one could call it that) when they'd acquired the cramped, compact rental vehicle, arguing that the effects of the *féth fiada* enshrouding him might cause accidents were he to drive. Unaccustomed, however, to driving on the "wrong" side of the car, on the "wrong" side of the road, she was having a time of it.

For heaven's sake, if the sheep would just stop catapulting themselves onto the road, I might have a chance! she'd snapped the last time he'd laughed. *They come out of nowhere, like they're dropping from the sky.*

Poppycok. Sheep trundle. Slow as snails. If you'd quit rubbernecking, trying to look everywhere at once, you'd see them coming. he'd teased. By Danu, he adored her fine-featured face, the expressions that flitted across it, her temperament. She had an inner fire that begged provoking, just for the pleasure of

watching it bum.

Right. I'm supposed to drive past Loch Ness and not look at it? What if Nessie pops her head up and I miss it? You've been around for thousands of years. I've never been to Scotland. They should keep the damned sheep off the road. Put up fences. Why are there no fences in Scotland? Don't they believe in protecting the tourists? And what's wrong with two-lane roads? Have they never heard of two-lane roads?

If it's not two lanes, ka-lyrra, how are you tuning such a hard time staying on your side of it?

She'd bated her teeth in a ferocious little scowl and he'd had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing. Or dragging her into his arms and kissing her, which would have certainly resulted in a wreck.

Okay, one and a half lanes, she'd begrudged irritably. I'm trying to stay on my three-quarters of a lane of it.

And with a haughty glare, she'd promptly gone back to trying to look everywhere, while avoiding sheep and driving wrong-sided twice-over, spending more time off the road than on.

And he was back to trying not to laugh.

He relished her reaction to the land he'd long loved best, far more than Ireland, perhaps more even than anyplace on all of Danu. He could give it no rhyme or reason. Scotland and her people just did something to him. Always had. If Gabrielle's inability to keep her eyes (and the car) on the road was any indication, Scotland was exerting the same ineffable pull on her too.

And how could it not? Late summer was breathtaking in the

Highlands, the hills dappled with the colors of the waning season: the deep reddish-purple of bell heather, the pale pink cross-leaved heath, the heart-shaped silver heads of sillar shakles. It would be a few weeks yet before ling and heather truly began to paint entire hillsides with their purple-pink haze, and he found himself hoping they'd still be there to see it.

He'd like to see Gabrielle running through a field of heather; he'd like to strip her naked and push her down in it and have his wicked way with her.

And he would, he promised himself. Soon. Now that she was safe.

It wouldn't be long before they were at the Castle Keltar. The lights of Inverness were even now fading away in his side-view mirror.

Inverness.

Morganna.

It was near here that she'd lived so long ago, at Castle Brodie.

And suddenly, in that side-view mirror there were no roads, no hotels or shops, no diners or pubs, nothing but wide-open, unspoiled land stretching beneath a vast blue sky...

I love you, he'd told her, astonished himself when the words had fallen from his tongue. But Circenn had just been born and was wrapped in blankets, cradled in her arms— his *son*. She'd been sweat-glistening, damp-haired, exhausted, and glowing with an innately female radiance. And something had come over him. He'd said it, and it had been too late to recant. And, bloody hell, how swiftly he'd wished to recant.

She'd torn her gaze reluctantly from the bairn and tipped her face up.

And she'd laughed.

If he'd had a soul, it would have sliced right thorough it.

Her laughter had been soft and wry, and all the more abrasive for it. For in it, there'd been a touch of pity.

Ye canna love, Fae. Ye have no soul.

So much for Adam Black's words. Had any woman ever believed them? Or merely bowed to his irresistible sensual lure, fallen prey in body but never in heart? Once, he'd not cared. But time and contact with humans had done strange things to him, changed him, made him begin to wonder about things he'd never wondered about before— and sometimes he felt like he imagined Gabrielle must: straddling two worlds, one foot here, one foot there, no place that felt like home.

How do you know I can't love? he'd hissed. So casually she'd thrown the words back in his face, words he'd never said before. Words he'd never said again. *Define love, Morganna.*

She'd been silent for a time, staring down at the tiny infant snuffling wetly in her arms.

Love means ye'd die for that person a thousand times o'er, she'd finally said, gazing down at the newborn. *Ye'd give the verra last drop of all ye had to give to tarry at their side but one moment more, to behold them alive and hale and happy.*

That's not fair, he'd countered. *You know I don't have a soul. If I die, I cease to exist forever. If you die, you go on. To some other time, some other place, some other world. I become dust.*

Nothing more, you can't hold me to the same criteria.

Ye wish to play at being like us but nae held to the same accounts? If ye truly love someone, Fae princeling, ye'd give the verra last drop of all ye had to give— whate'er it may be. And ye'd nae squabble o'er differences.

Maybe it's you who can't love, Morganna. Maybe when you love someone it means you'd be willing— not to die— but to give up your immortal soul for them. So maybe it's your failing, not mine.

And so the argument had begun. The timeless, eternal, never-changing argument between them. Until the unique Tuatha Dé bond forged between a Fae male and human woman the instant a child was conceived had become more painful than pleasing. Until they'd both built walls to keep the other out.

By Danu, how many times had they had that fight? A hundred? A thousand?

Right up to the day she died. And he'd stood over her deathbed, trying to get her to take the damned elixir of life, as he'd been trying to get her to since she'd been seventeen; but like a fool, in a rare moment of abjectly stupid honesty all those years ago, he'd told the young Morganna of its unsavory side effect: that immortality and immortal souls could not coexist.

That once she took it, in a short number of years all trace of that by which she defined her humanity would be gone. That soft golden glow surrounding her would fade day by day, until nothing of it was left. Until she was as void of that divine inner flame as any Fae.

She would change, they always did.

But better a soulless Morganna than a dead one.

Never, Adam. Let me die.

He could have taken away her memory of his admission. He could have forced her to take the elixir. He could have made her believe anything he'd wanted her to believe.

But what he'd wanted her to believe was that he was worth it.

Would it be so bloody bad to be like me? he'd thundered. Am I such a foul being, then, without a soul, Morganna? Have I not been good to you? What is it you want from me I've not given you? What have I failed to do, be?

"Adam, there's something I don't get. Why didn't Darroc just kill us?" Gabby asked abruptly, jarring him from his dark reverie. "He had the advantage of surprise. He could have shot you in the back, or hit you over the head or something."

He blinked, rubbing a hand over his eyes. Christ, those memories had come suddenly and without warning, crashing over him so intensely that he'd forgotten where he was for a few moments. He'd been back there, hating her for dying. Hating her for looking down on him until the very end for lacking that with which she'd had the grace to be born.

Hating all humans, with their holier-than-thou souls, lumping all mortals together as one unilaterally vile species. And finally remembering that he was. after all. a demigod— so fuck them!— he had walked through the Highlands for a time as Death himself.

Jaw clenched, he shoved the whispers of times-gone-by back into that dark corner of his mind he never willingly visited. His *oubliette*, his place of forgetting. Layers upon layers of

memories dropped into the pit and left there, stretching back thousands of years. To immerse in it would be to invite madness. Yet another lie he'd told Circenn was that learning too much too quickly caused madness among their kind, when the truth had been a subtle variation of that: It was not knowing when to forget that did.

"You don't know Darroc, *ka-lyrra*," he said. "He likes to play with his prey before he kills it. He wouldn't take the risk while I was touching you because, if he didn't knock me out or kill me instantly. I could sift us to safety. He didn't bother to conceal himself and the Hunters this time with the *féth fiada*, because he wanted me to see him and hear him. He was trying to antagonize me, to get me to turn on him, to separate us. After what he saw, I'd wager he now wants you as much as he wants me."

"Why? "

He glanced at her. She'd twisted her long hair up in one of those clips that she was so fond of, and there was a little spiky tail sticking straight up, poking the roof of the car, bobbing perkily as they bounced and careened over the rough road. She had on her soft suede jacket with the fleecy lining, the collar turned up, framing her slender neck. The early-evening sun was a fiery ball sliding down behind Ben Killan, gilding her dainty profile as she nibbled her lower lip.

And she was the bonniest damn thing in all the Highlands, far more than the blooming bens and sparkling burns.

She was funny and stubborn and sexy and smart and packed with human passion, and she did something to him he couldn't explain. Kissing Gabrielle, he'd decided back in the suite, with his arms full of her lush softness, was as close to tasting heaven

as a man without a soul could hope to get. She'd responded to him with all the explosive passion he'd sensed in her the moment he'd laid eyes on her, rising swiftly to the edge of climax. He could so easily have brought her to it after they'd been interrupted, could have been merciful and relieved the tension in her body while they'd sifted, or even later on the train or plane.

But he'd not been about to let her off so lightly. He liked the thought of her stirred to painful awareness of him. Hutting with it, just like he was, constantly, painfully aware of her. They would suffer together. When he finally gave her that first orgasm, it would be followed by a dozen more. By his cock in her, deep to the hilt. Branding her his own.

His human body, it seemed, had pulled a MacKeltar trick; it had looked at her and growled: *mine*. And there was no going back. For either of them. If she hadn't figured that out yet, she would soon.

"To get to me. He's a twisted bastard. He likes to take from me. Especially mortal women. I had to play a deep game to keep him from finding out about Morganna. But he knows about you now, and he's not going to stop coming."

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then opened it, "Would it get to you, if he took me?"

He glanced at her, but she wouldn't look his way. There'd been a strained note in her voice. For a novel change, her gaze was fixed firmly on the road ahead. The question was important to her. And to him. "Yes, Gabrielle," he said with quiet intensity. "It would."

"Oh." She was silent a long moment. Then, "Are you sure we'll

really be safe at this place we're going to?"

He smiled faintly. She was as bad as he was when it came to skirting issues and changing subjects. No matter. There was time. He would see to it that there was more than enough time.

"We already are: we've passed the wards. The queen is alerted the moment a Tuatha Dé crosses her wards and comes within a thousand leagues of Keltar land, and those wards identify the trespasser. This is the one place Darroc can't come without revealing himself to Aoibheal. If he did, the game would be over, and he's not about to let that happen. Besides, he has little familiarity with the human realm, and if I know Darroc, he'll focus on what must have brought him to Cincinnati. He'll keep trying to find Circenn."

"Will the queen know that *you're* crossed her wards?"

"The wards were designed for a Tuatha Dé, which I am no longer, so I don't think so."

"You didn't think Darroc would find us so quickly."

It wasn't a question, but he answered it anyway. "I underestimated him; I didn't think he'd dare bring forth more Hunters. There's no way he could have found us so quickly with only the four Hunters you saw with him in Cincinnati. But he summoned more."

"How many more?" she said, glancing at him, eyes widening with alarm.

"You don't want to know." When he'd turned her in his arms to face him, he'd been looking over her shoulder. A full score of Hunters had materialized right behind her, just waiting for the moment he would turn to Darroc and stop touching her.

Crammed wing to dark wing, looming over her. He'd never seen so many Hunters together in one place, outside of their Unseelie prison. Even he'd found that dark legion mildly disconcerting.

More than disconcerting. The mere thought that they might get their claws on Gabrielle had done something to the human heart inside his chest, had made it feel as if it were... seizing up, being squeezed in a giant, crushing fist.

"Were they behind me?" she asked warily. She didn't miss a thing. He nodded. "Uh... more than... er, a dozen?"

"Yes."

"You're right," she said hastily. "I don't want to know." Another lengthy pause. "You know ... um, what Darroc said about you and him playing with mortals ..."

A muscle leapt in his jaw. "What about it, Gabrielle?"

"Was it, er... true?"

"No." Adam said. "Darroc lies. He was just trying to fill your head with nonsense. Cause dissension between us, do the old divide-and-conquer thing."

"Really?" She looked at him, green-gold eyes wide, searching.

"No," Adam said. "Really." He met her gaze levelly, willing her to believe him, hating that the one time she was looking as though she might, he was lying. But who and what he'd once been was not who and what he was now, and he'd not be tried and convicted for ancient crimes.

She nodded slowly, then, "So." she changed the subject briskly, "are you sure that these MacKeltars we're going to see will

believe me? Even though they won't be able to see you?"

"Ah, *ka-lyrra*, I'm not sure there's anything the MacKeltar wouldn't believe. They've pretty much seen it all."

* * *

"We've lost him, Darroc," said Bastion.

Darroc stared at the Hunter in icy silence. Watching Adam with his little human had reminded him of the times long ago when they'd ridden the Wild Hunt together, when they'd hunted like brother-gods, invincible and free, ruled by nothing and no one. They'd been inseparable, known each other's thoughts as well as their own. Mortals had been nothing more to them than lowly beasts, good for a chase, amusing to play with, to set upon each other and watch them enact their silly tragedies.

But Adam had changed. He'd been corrupted by contact with humans. And he'd turned on his own kind over one of them. On *him*, Darroc, who'd once favored Adam as he'd favored no other.

Adam had become protective of humans, spending most of his time among the short-lived creatures. It was inconceivable to Darroc that any sentient entity could prefer humans to the Tuatha Dé.

He'd waited for Adam to return to the fold, to indulge and get

over his perverse fascination. But millennia had passed and Darroc had come to see Adam for the abomination he was.

Incensed to discover Adam dallying passionately with the human, he'd let himself and his Hunters be seen. He'd *wanted* his scarred face to be the last thing Adam saw as he lay dying, as he watched Darroc break his woman.

But Adam hadn't responded to his taunts in his usual way. No, he'd reacted as if Darroc didn't even matter, as if his taunts couldn't touch him, as if only the safety of his pathetic little mortal was of any concern.

For the second time in as many days, Adam had used his body to shield his human and sifted out before Darroc could stop him.

And now the *sin siriche du* (who was no longer worthy of such a noble appellation) was out there somewhere with full knowledge that Darroc had loosed the Hunters. And Darroc knew Adam knew exactly what that meant: that he was planning to challenge the queen.

Which meant he had to find Adam again and fast. Before the clever *D'Jai* prince devised some way to get Aoibheal's attention, even powerless as he was. Darroc could no longer afford the luxury of drawing out his death. When next he saw Adam Black, his demise would have to be swift. He couldn't let his thirst for revenge jeopardize his ultimate goal.

Still... he might keep the woman for a time. She liked Fae males? He'd show her what Fae males could do to human women. He'd show her what Adam really was somewhere deep inside though he tried to deny it. Tuatha Dé: a god. And she *would* worship before she died.

"Don't look at me like that, Darroc," the Hunter growled, jarring him from his thoughts. "We were ready. We could have slain them in a human heartbeat. *You* insisted on separating them and taking them alive. Is this about regaining our freedom, or your vengeance?"

"Both," said Darroc flatly. "And it's none of your concern. Tell me, where did you last have their scent?"

"At a human airport."

"Their destination?"

The Hunter shifted leathery wings. "There were too many humans about. Their scent had been scattered by the scent of too many others by the time we arrived. We were unable to determine it."

Darroc cursed viciously.

"Let me call forth more Hunters. We'll find them again." said Bastion.

"The Unseelie King would note their absence," said Darroc. "He's no fool."

"But he is currently seeking his amusement elsewhere. None have seen him for quite some time," replied Bastion.

Darroc pondered the bit of information.

If only the Unseelie King could be relied upon, could be sought for counsel or alliance, but the King of Darkness was like no other of their race, so ancient that Aoibheal. at just under sixty thousand, may as well have just drawn her first breath. It was rumored that the Unseelie King counted his existence by many *hundreds* of thousands of years; some whispered it to be even

more. And was, more often than not, quite mad. Few ever so much as glimpsed him. and none knew his name or true form. He'd created his own realm within the shadow-realm of the Unseelie prison, a fortress that was said to house entire galaxies; a dark, vast dominion sown with traps for the unwary, into which none that he knew of had ever entered uninvited and returned.

For that matter, none had ever entered *invited* and returned, save the Seelie queen on two occasions. Even she gave the King of Darkness wide berth.

Still... if he was occupied elsewhere, Darroc could certainly use more Hunters. "How long since last the king was seen?"

"Two score and ten," said Bastion.

A tidy bit of time, a risk worth taking. "Another score of you, no more," Darroc conceded. "Find Adam's son. I believe he will try to use him to get word to the queen. We must prevent that from happening. Saturate both Cincinnati and the Highlands. When you locate his half-blood bastard, summon me. And if you happen to find Adam, do not approach. I want to be there when he dies."

Bastion nodded, sharp teeth gleaming.

Drustan MacKeltar tossed back a swallow of scotch and glanced around the table with a satisfied smile.

In the past year the MacKeltars had pretty much seen it all.

And God willing, we've seen the last of it, he thought fervently.

After so many calamitous events, life was peaceful and sweet, all he'd ever dreamed and more. He wanted naught more than to immerse himself in simple pleasures for the rest of it. Like a meal shared with those he loved, before a crackling peat fire laid with sheaves of fragrant heather.

His gaze skimmed his dining companions: There was Gwen, his beloved wife, brilliant physicist, and radiant mother of their precious two-month-old twins, prattling happily away to Chloe about— of all things— the schools their children might one day attend.

And there was Chloe, his brother's cherished wife, an antiquities expert and bookish scholar. They'd just learned last week that she would soon be adding to the MacKeltar clan, and she'd been glowing ever since, as had her husband, Dageus.

Ah, and there was Dageus, his twin, younger by three minutes, and best friend.

It had been months since that night in The Belthew Building,

when Dageus had battled and defeated the modern-day sect of the Draghar, who'd been determined to resurrect their ancient namesake. Dageus's eyes were once again sunny and clear, and he was full of easy laughter. Drustan couldn't recall ever seeing him happier.

Initially, Dageus had spoken of building his own castle on the northern third of the MacKeltar estate, but Drustan had swiftly put an end to such foolish talk.

The castle Dageus had overseen construction of for Drustan and Gwen—the fabulous home that had been a labor of his love for them, and bespoke it in every beautifully crafted detail—contained over a hundred and twenty rooms. It had been designed to house an entire clan, and Drustan intended for it to do just that.

He'd not lost his brother twice before to bid him any kind of fare-thee-well now. Clans weren't like modern-day families. Highland clans stayed together, worked together, played together, and raised their children together. Conquered their own little corner of the world and stuffed it to overflowing with their unique, proud heritage.

Hence Dageus and Chloe had taken up residence in the castle, settling happily into a suite in the west wing, opposite Drustan and Gwen in the east.

And each eve without fail, at seven sharp, they met to dine (their wives insisted they dress for it, and he would have donned any blethering thing she'd asked to see his wee Gwen in such dresses and sexy shoes as twenty-first-century women wore), and the stone walls of the castle were filled with laughter, fine conversation, and the warmth of love.

Cocking his head, Drustan glanced up at the portrait of his father. Silvan, and his next-mother, Nell, hanging above the fireplace. He fancied Silvan's painted brown eyes twinkled merrily and Nell's smile curved more sweetly. Aye, life was rich. After all their trials and tribulations, it had settled into a peaceful cadence, with no life-or-death complications, no oath-breaking, no time-traveling, no curses, no evil Druids or Gypsies or crazed seers or Tuatha Dé.

He was looking forward to a very long stretch of unbroken peace and quiet. The rest of his life would serve well.

He pushed aside his plate and was about to suggest they adjourn to the library, when their butler, Farley, came blustering in, white hair bristling, his tall, hunched frame now ramrod straight. Something had clearly ruffled him.

"Milord," Farley said with a disgruntled *humph*.

"Mister MacKeltar," Drustan corrected for the umpteenth time, with a this-is-really-wearing-thin-but-I'm-determined-to-be-patient smile. No matter how many times he told Farley that he was not a laird, that he was simply Mr. MacKeltar, that it was Christopher (his modern-day descendant who lived up the road in the oldest castle on the land) who was actually laird, Farley refused to hear it. The eighty-something-year-old butler, who insisted he was sixty-two and who had obviously never before buttled in his life until the day he'd arrived on their doorstep, was determined to be butler to a lord. Period. And he wasn't about to let Drustan interfere with that aspiration.

If not for Gwen, Drustan might have been more adamant about collecting him, but Gwen doted on Ian Llewelyn McFarley, and had since the day he'd arrived, followed by so many other McFarleys to be employed in and around the castle that

Drustan was no longer certain some days if it was Castle Keltar he lived in or Castle Farley.

If might made right, he thought wryly, it was Castle Farley by sheer numbers alone. At last count he employed fourteen of his butler's children and spouses. seventeen grandchildren, and there were twelve wee greats on the premises, from toddler to teen. The McFarleys were a prolific bunch, reproducing like the clans of yore. Drustan looked forward to trying to catch up. He would certainly enjoy the trying, he thought, gaze raking possessively over his wee, sensual wife.

"Aye, milord MacKeltar."

Drustan rolled his eyes. Gwen snorted into her napkin.

"As I was trying to tell you, milord, 'tis a visitor you're having and, though mayhap 'tis not my place to say so, she's a most"—*sniff*—"improper lass. Not at all like young Miss Chloe here"—huge, infatuated smile—"or our delightful Lady Gwen. Verily she puts me more in mind of that one"—he nodded toward Dageus—"when first he arrived. There's something not right about her, not right at all."

Drustan felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Peace and quiet was on the agenda. Naught more. He glanced questioningly at his wife.

Gwen shrugged and shook her head. "I haven't invited anyone, Drustan. Did you, Chloe?"

"No," Chloe replied. "What's not right about her, Farley?" she asked curiously.

An annoyed *humph*. A few *ahems*, then a thoroughly miffed. "She's a fine enough lass, that is, when one is able to actually

look at her, but"— he broke off with a deeply aggrieved sigh and cleared his throat several times before continuing— "'twould appear she's having, er... solidity problems."

"What?" Gwen said, frowning "'Solidity problems'? What on earth does that mean, Farley?"

Drustan inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. He didn't like the sound of this. Solidity problems did not bode well for the serenity of the occupants of Castle Keltar.

"'tis precisely as I said. Solidity problems," Farley reiterated, obviously loath to commit further to describing their unexpected guest.

"Oh, my," Gwen said faintly. "You mean, she's solid and then she's not? As in, she's becomes invisible?"

"You'd not be hearing such a thing from me," Farley said stiffly. "'twould make one sound quite addled, such an assertion."

"And she's asking for *me*?" Drustan said irritably. How could that be? The only people he knew in the twenty-first century were those he'd met through Gwen, or since settling in on the MacKeltar estate. He'd certainly not made the acquaintance of anyone with solidity problems. Verily, he would have avoided such a person like the grimmest plague. He'd had enough of spells and enchantments to last a dozen lifetimes.

"Nay, she's asking for that one." Farley nodded at Dageus.

"Me?" Dageus looked startled. Glancing at Chloe, he shrugged "I have no idea, lass."

Exhaling gustily, Drustan stood. So much for peace and quiet and simple pleasures. How foolish to think a Keltar Druid's life

might ever be normal. In any blethering century. " 'twould seem we'd best find out." he said. "Somehow I doona think we'll be so fortunate that this lass with 'solidity problems' might go non-solid in a permanent fashion and leave us all in peace."

When he made for the great hall, Dageus, Gwen, and Chloe were close on his heels.

* * *

Gabby stood in the entrance of the castle, shaking her head, stunned.

Adam hadn't bothered to tell her that the MacKeltars lived in a magnificent, sprawling castle with round turrets and square towers, enclosed by a mighty stone wall, and replete with medieval portcullis and barbican, the great hall of which alone could have swallowed her entire eleven-room Victorian.

Nor had he given her any warning that she might have wanted to run a brush through her hair or powder her nose and try to make herself presentable to... to aristocrats or... peerage or whatever manner of lordly people occupied castles.

Nope, just another abrupt dropping of Gabby O'Callaghan, sleep-deprived and unkempt, into yet another unfathomable situation, wholly unprepared.

She tilted back her head, examining her surroundings. An

intricately carved balustrade encircled the hall on the second floor, and an elegant double staircase swept down from opposing sides, met in the middle, and descended in one wide train of marble stairs. It was a staircase out of a fairy tale, the kind a princess might sweep down, dressed in an elegant gown, on her way to a ball.

Brilliant tapestries adorned the walls, plush rugs were scattered about, and colorful stained glass embellished the many tall windows. The furnishings in the hall were massive carved pieces, detailed with complex Celtic knotwork. There were two fireplaces, both large enough for grown men to stand in, faced by high-backed chairs tufted with rich brocades, and arranged beside gleaming accent tables.

Corridors shot off in all directions, and she couldn't even begin to imagine how many rooms were in the place. A hundred? Two hundred? Complete with secret passageways and a dungeon? she wondered fancifully.

It wasn't until they'd begun climbing the long winding private drive to the estate that Adam had finally divulged the fascinating, though sketchy, bit of information that the MacKeltars were descended from an ancient line of Druids that had served the Tuatha Dé Danaan for aeons— and were the sole upholders of Man's side of The Compact between human and Fae.

"The Compact?" she'd echoed, stunned.

The O'Callaghan *Books* held scant information about the legendary treaty. She was beginning to realize that if she survived all of this, she was going to be able to add a wealth of information to the volumes for future generations— more and more *accurate* information— than anything they held to date.

Perhaps she'd even get to see the sacred... er, thing, whatever The Compact was— she didn't even know what it was supposed to look like. And how much, she wondered, ablaze with curiosity, might the MacKeltars be able to tell her about the Fae? As upholders of the treaty, they should know a great deal. She couldn't wait to pick their brains.

She snorted softly, not missing the irony of her thoughts. She'd spent her entire life determined to hide from all things Fae, refusing to open the *Books*, turning studiously away, and suddenly she was eager to know as much as possible about them.

The O'Callaghan *Books* had been wrong about many things.

And she needed to know just how many things, and just how wrong.

Only then might she be able to make some sense of the dark, seductive Fae prince who had blasted into her life and turned it so completely upside down.

She glanced up at him. He was standing silently, his gaze focused ahead, his big body still and tense. Was he uncertain of their welcome? It was difficult for her to fathom Adam being uncertain of anything.

She was tipping her head back to inquire, when two men entered the great hall and the question flew right out of her head.

They were simply two of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen. Twins, though different. They were both tall and powerfully built. One was taller by a few inches, with dark hair that swept just past his shoulders and eyes like shards of silver

and ice, while the other had long black hair falling in a single braid to his waist, and eyes as gold as Adam's torque. They were elegantly dressed in tailored clothing of dark hues, with magnificent bodies that dripped raw sex appeal.

Oh, my, she marveled, *they don't make men like these in the States*. Were these typical Scotsmen? If so, she was going to have to get Elizabeth over here somehow. A connoisseur of romance novels, Elizabeth's favorites were the Scottish ones, and these two men looked as if they'd just stepped straight off one of those covers.

"Try not to gape, *ka-lyrra*. They're only human. Mortal. Puny. And married. Both of them. Happily."

So much for fixing Elizabeth up, Gabby rued, glancing up at Adam. His hand was resting possessively in the small of her back, and he was looking down at her with an unmistakably irritated expression that looked a bit like... jealousy? The *sin siriche du*—jealous of two human men? Over her? The notion seemed so unlikely to her as to be impossible; nonetheless, it made tiny breaths clot up in her throat.

"I'm not gaping." she managed to say, and really she wasn't, because as soon as she'd looked back at Adam, she'd realized that though the two men might be gorgeous for humans, they were nothing compared to him.

Take those two men, merge them together, sprinkle them with Fae dust, brush them with ten times the simmering sensuality and elemental danger, and that's Adam Black, she thought.

"Dageus, are you seeing..." the taller of the two began, with a disgruntled note in a voice deep and laced with a thick, soft burr.

"Rather like the faint, misty outline of a lass, Drustan?" his golden-eyed twin finished for him, with the same sexy accent.

"Aye," the one called Drustan said, scowling.

"Aye," Dageus agreed.

"Oh!" Gabby exclaimed. She'd forgotten about Adam's hand at the small of her back (deadly man, he'd gotten her so used to his constant touching that she was now more likely to notice its absence than its presence!). Then again, how could the MacKeltars see her at all? she wondered, frowning. Because they were Druids? Heavens, she had so many questions!

Slipping away from Adam's touch, she hastily apologized to the two tall, dark men. "I'm so sorry. I keep forgetting that I disappear when he's touching me, because nothing disappears for me. I guess we probably gave your butler a bit of a fright." At their blank looks, she forged on. "I'm Gabrielle O'Callaghan," she said, stepping forward and offering her hand, "and I know you don't know me, and I know this all probably seems quite strange, but I can explain. Could we maybe sit down somewhere? It feels like we've been traveling forever."

The men exchanged glances. " 'We'?" the one called Drustan said warily.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Drustan," a petite woman with straight silvery-blond hair and fringy bangs pushed past the towering Highlander, "where are your manners?"

A second woman, also petite, but with long curly hair streaked with copper and gold, emerged from behind the other twin, and they both hastened forward to greet her.

"I'm Gwen," the silvery blonde said, "and that's my husband,

Drustan. This is Chloe and her husband, Dageus."

"Pleased to meet you," Gabby said, suddenly feeling like the queen of grunge, confronted by the two beautiful women. Here she was in an elegant castle, with four elegantly dressed people, she'd been traveling nonstop for a day and a half— or at least she thought she had; the time zones had gotten her rather discombobulated— and four plane changes and hours of stressful driving later, she looked it. Her hair had slipped out of its clip hours ago and she could feel it poking straight up from her head in back, she had no makeup on, and even the wrinkles in her clothes had wrinkles. She shot Adam a withering look. "I can't believe you didn't tell me we were going to a castle and that all these people would be here. Look at me, I'm a jet-lagged, bedraggled mess."

"Um, excuse me, but who are you talking to? And you're not a mess," Chloe assured her. "Believe me, Gwen and I have been in our share of scrapes and felt bedraggled ourselves, and you're not bedraggled. Is she, Gwen?"

Gwen smiled. "Hardly. Bedraggled is being in the full throes of nicotine withdrawal, and after a week on a bus with a group of senior citizens, falling into a cave, and landing on a body."

"And then getting tossed back a few centuries, with no idea of what's going on," Chloe agreed. "Naked, too, weren't you?"

Gwen nodded wryly.

Gabby blinked.

"I gave you my plaid," Drustan protested indignantly. " 'twas ne'er my intention to send you back bare as a wee bairn, Gwen."

Gwen gave her husband a loving glance. "I know," she said

softly.

The one called Dageus tossed his head impatiently. "All of which is neither here nor there. To whom do you speak that we canna see, lass?"

Tossed back a few centuries? Naked? What? Good heavens, were these people like Adam's half-Fae son, displaced in time? Her own life, her little corner of the Tri-State was looking increasingly normal to her with each passing day.

"Tell them, Gabrielle." Adam urged impatiently.

Blinking. Gabby nodded. "I have one of the, er... fairies here with me— "

"Tuatha Dé," Adam corrected irritably. "You're bloody well making me sound like Tinkerbell."

"One of the Tuatha Dé," she amended, with a wry smile. "He says I'm making him sound like Tinkerbell, but, believe me, no one could ever confuse Adam Black with Tinker— "

"Adam Black of the Tuatha Dé Danaan?" Dageus exclaimed, those exotic golden eyes widening.

"You know him?" To Adam, she said peevishly, "You didn't tell me they knew you."

"I wasn't certain if Dageus retained any memory of me, *ka-lyrra*. He was near death at the time, and I didn't know if Aoibheal would permit him recall," he said mildly.

"You mean, the Tuatha Dé Danaan that saved my husband's life?" Chloe exclaimed. "He's here with you?"

Okay, that threw her completely off balance. Adam had saved

Dageus's life? When? How? Why? What was he doing, going around saving people's lives? What kind of fairy did that? None of the ones she'd ever heard of. Fairies didn't go around *helping* humans.

For heaven's sake, she thought, staring up at him, mouth ajar, *do I even know him at all?*

Damn the O'Callaghan Books. Had they gotten anything besides his immense sexuality right?

Adam smiled faintly and, with a gentle finger beneath her chin, nudged her mouth shut. His gaze fixed on her lips for a moment and he lightly traced the pad of his thumb over her lower lip. When he applied a gentle pressure, she was mortified to feel the tip of her tongue slip out to taste him. She hadn't meant to do it; she hadn't been able to stop herself.

His face went instantly taut with lust and he made a guttural sound in his throat. Nostrils flaring, he drew several slow breaths, then said tightly. "What, didn't read about that one in your silly *Books*, Gabrielle? Doesn't mesh with your preconceptions? Imagine that."

"Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Would you have believed me?" he countered coolly.

She winced.

"Hence, I didn't tell you." He let his hand fall from her face.

"Oh, do you see that?" she heard Gwen exclaim, as if from a distance. "She just disappeared again! This is so fascinating! And now she's back."

Gabby was still staring up at him when Chloe took her hand,

gushing, "Oh, welcome, welcome, both of you. Are you hungry? Thirsty? What can we get you? And here, let us take your bags. So, er," she hesitated the briefest of moments. "I know this probably isn't the time for it, but just how old is Adam Black anyway? You see, I have a few questions about the Iron Age. Actually," she confided earnestly, "I have quite a few-questions about several— "

"*Can* he eat and drink?" Gwen interrupted, with an utterly fascinated expression. "I mean, is he actually there? And, er... exactly where is there? Is he in another dimension or something? Parallel to ours, maybe?"

Dageus and Drustan exchanged wry looks and shook their heads.

Then Drustan stepped forward and slipped an arm around his wife's shoulders. Silvery gaze resigned, he said, "Why doona we just address whether or not the lass is hungry and let matters of history and physics bide a wee." To the general vicinity near Gabby, he inclined his head and said with quiet formality. "The Keltar bid you welcome, Tuatha Dé. The Old Ones are e'er welcome in our home."

* * *

Adam watched Gabrielle through narrowed eyes and, though he appreciated Drustan's formal welcome, was pleased that Dageus

recalled him, and delighted that his *ka-lyrra* was finally beginning to see him for who he was, it was all currently doing little to appease him.

He'd not anticipated his reaction to seeing Gabrielle around the twins.

He didn't like it. Didn't like it one bit. There was too much testosterone in the room. And all of his— no inconsiderable amount— was invisible.

And knowing Drustan and Dageus were married wasn't doing a damn thing to ease his mind. Really, did she have to smile at them like that? Didn't she understand they were men and men were not to be trusted around a woman like Gabrielle, no matter how happily married they allegedly were? And Christ, he couldn't even mark his territory. Touching her in small, intimate ways failed to establish anything, because each time he did it, it only made her invisible to them.

He'd never hated being invisible more. Around normal men back in Cincinnati it had been of no consequence, but the Keltar were not normal men.

He toyed irritably with his empty tumbler of scotch, rolling it back and forth between his palms, eyeing the bottle on the sidebar.

Casting the MacKeltars a black look— which of course they couldn't see, but it made him feel mildly better— he stood, refilled his glass, and began pacing the library. It was a spacious, masculine room with cherry bookcases recessed in paneled walls, comfortable chairs and ottomans, a dusky rose marble fireplace, and tall bay windows. He circled it, absently examining books, listening while Gabby continued filling them

in on their— ah, no, *her*— version of events to date. He'd tried to get her to tell it his way, but she'd seemed perversely delighted by the opportunity to tell the MacKeltars all about how her life had gotten so screwed up since his advent into it.

Gwen and Chloe were making sympathetic little noises, and he could just smell the bloody female bonding going on in the room. Everyone was bonding, except for the invisible person.

Bloody hell, he was hungry. But did he get to eat? No. Gabby had spoken for both of them, bypassing a meal, accepting a light snack in the library.

Shortbreads, candies, and nuts? A mortal body could expire of starvation on such meager fare.

And she'd not yet even gotten to the part where Darroc and the Hunters had appeared yet. Gwen and Chloe seemed fascinated by the notion of *Sidhe-seers* and had been asking dozens of utterly unnecessary questions about what it was like to be one. At this rate, it could take all night to get to the important parts— like what Adam needed them to do. If only he could speak for himself! He was beginning to wonder if she'd even manage to get it all wrapped up by Lughnassadh.

Currently she was elaborating about those idiotic, apocryphal O'Callaghan *Books*, and Chloe, antiquities lover and relentless bookworm, was trying to set up a time to come to Cincinnati to see them. *Books*. Faery was in danger, his queen was at risk, Darroc was trying to kill them, Hunters were on the loose, and they were talking about frigging books!

It mollified him only mildly to hear her say. "You're welcome to see them, Chloe, but, frankly, I think my ancestors might have gotten a lot of stuff wrong."

About high damn time she admitted that, he thought, eyes narrowing, his gaze raking over her possessively. Willing her to look up at him. To make him feel less invisible.

But she didn't so much as cast a tiny glance his way, she was too busy answering yet another irrelevant question.

He was just about to stalk out and go help himself to something from the kitchen when Dageus said thoughtfully. "So 'tis the *féth fiada* he's cursed with that keeps us from seeing him?"

Adam's head whipped around. "What does he know of it, *ka-lyrra*?" he said, suddenly alert. Dageus was another human wild card, like his *Sidhe-seer*; the things he'd endured in the past year had changed him in ways of which none could be entirely certain. Had changed him so much, in fact, that when the present Dageus had encountered himself in the past— which *should* have canceled one of them out— it hadn't. Which was part of the reason the High Council had so firmly advocated his destruction. Of course, some among them had been driven by more nefarious motives, like Darroc.

"Yes, it is, and Adam wants to know what you know of it," Gabby related for him.

Dageus smiled faintly. "More than I e'er wished to. I used it myself to borrow a few rare tomes I needed not too long ago. We call it the magic mantle, or Druid's fog. 'tis no' easy to wear, 'tis a chilling spell. There are two versions of it. The version the MacKeltars were taught, and the spell the Draghar knew— a much more potent, triumvirate enchantment, in the Tuatha Dé tongue. I ne'er used that version."

" 'The Draghar'?" Gabby echoed, frowning.

"For a time," Chloe explained. "Dageus was possessed by the souls of thirteen ancient, evil Druids who'd been banished by the Tuatha Dé to an immortal prison four thousand years ago. They were called the Draghar."

"Oh. I see." Gabby sounded quite unconvinced of her own words.

Chloe laughed softly. "I'll explain it all later, Gabby. I promise."

"Bloody hell, yes!" Adam exploded, stalking to Gabrielle's side. Closing a hand on her arm, he said urgently. "Ask him if he still retains the Draghar's memories, Gabrielle." During the time the thirteen dark Druids had possessed Dageus, their knowledge had been his, and they'd once been privy to virtually all Tuatha Dé lore. Adam had assumed that when Aoibheal had destroyed the Draghar, she'd stripped those memories from the Highlander's mind.

But what if she hadn't? If Dageus knew the ancient countercurse in the Tuatha Dé's tongue, he could terminate Adam's enchantment! No mere mortal could do it, nor could he himself, but a full-blooded MacKeltar Druid who knew the ancient words certainly could.

He'd be able to speak for himself, be seen again, be solid again, be able to make it unmistakably clear that Gabrielle was *his*.

"Okay, but they can't see me again, Adam. Stop touching me."

Stop touching me. Being invisible was making him feel impotent enough around the Keltar, and impotent was not a feeling Adam was capable of dealing with on any level, and her words provoked something fast and furious and primal in him. He was consumed with the sudden imperative to make her

remember that not so long ago she'd been begging him to kiss her deeper, that he'd had his hand down her pants. Damn near inside *her*, and would have been there— with something far more intimate and personal than a hand— if they'd not been interrupted. That they had some serious unfinished business to attend to.

In one smooth motion, he tugged her up into his arms and crushed her mouth with a hot, savage kiss, plunging deep, claiming, saying with it: *I am your man, and don't forget it.*

Had she not yielded instantly, gone soft against him, accepting his kiss completely, he wasn't sure what he might have done. He was merely grateful that he didn't have to find out. In the library, invisible, with little to no foreplay was not how he wanted her first time to be. He wanted her first time to be an overwhelming, mind-numbing. perfect seduction that would brand her to the very core of her glowing golden soul.

Fortunately, she not only yielded, her knees did that little, utterly feminine buckling thing that made him feel like a veritable god among men, and he was able to make himself let her go.

When he did, she sank limply back into her seat, lips parted, eyes unfocused. She flushed, looking dazed, then shook her head abruptly.

He was pleased to see that Dageus and Drustan eyed her intently, then exchanged a thoughtful glance. Good, he'd finally marked his territory, at least a little.

"He wants to know if you retain the memories of the Draghar," Gabby said with another shake of her head, as if she were still trying to clear it.

Dageus nodded. " 'tis why I brought it up."

"You do?" Drustan said, looking startled.

"Aye, though they've gone, their memories remain. Their knowledge is mine."

"Christ, you told me naught of that," Drustan growled. "*All* of their knowledge?"

"Aye. Masses of the stuff littering my mind. I spoke naught of it as 'twas of no relevance. With the Draghar no longer inside me, I have no temptation to use any of it. And the answer is aye again, I believe I can remove his curse. I, for one, would prefer to be able to see him. I doona care for this invisibility of his at all. 'tis making me uneasy."

"Yes, " Adam said, punching the air, elated. "Do it. Right now. Hurry the hell up." If he'd had the slightest suspicion that Dageus still possessed the memories of the thirteen, he'd have come here first, the instant the queen had abandoned him in London.

But he'd never imagined that Aoibheal might permit those memories to endure; so much of the Draghar's knowledge was innately dangerous, intrinsically corruptive. He snorted. His queen was slipping. When he was immortal again, they were going to have a long talk. Perhaps it was time he took a seat on her infernal High Council himself and got into the thick of things.

"He says, 'Would you please try?' " Gabby translated, tossing him a wordless little rebuke. He shrugged. Couldn't she understand his impatience?

"Is it forbidden magic?" Drustan asked Dageus.

"Nay. But 'tis the old Tuatha Dé magic. Not something we were necessarily given to use, though considering the queen left me it, well. .." He shrugged.

"Do you feel 'tis dangerous in any way?" Drustan pressed.

"Nay, 'tis but a chant in their tongue."

"For Christ's sake, would you say it already?" Adam hissed. "I need to be *seen*. I can't stand this bloody frigging invisibility."

" 'tis your choice, brother. I leave it to your judgment." Drustan said.

After a moment's reflection, Dageus said, "I see no harm in it." Of Gabby, he inquired. "Where is he?"

When she pointed, Dageus rose and, circling the area she'd indicated, began to speak.

Or rather, Gabby thought, he opened his mouth and sound came out, but he wasn't speaking. It wasn't a single voice that issued from his lips but myriad voices, dozens layered atop one another, rising and falling, swelling and breaking. It was melodic yet chillingly dissonant, beautiful yet strangely awful. Like fire that one could crawl inside of trying to get warm, only to end up freezing to death in it.

It raised all the fine hair on Gabby's body, and she realized that if this was the old Tuatha Dé tongue, it was not a language Adam had ever spoken around her.

Whatever tongue he'd been speaking on those infrequent occasions wasn't this. This was a voice of raw power. Such sound could mesmerize, could seduce against a person's will. It was old magic, undiluted and pure. The kind she'd always

imagined the Hunters possessed. A terrible magic.

As it built to a crescendo, she shuddered, closing her eyes.

"Easy, *ka-lyrra*; it's because you're a *Sidhe*-seer that it affects you so," she heard Adam say softly. "It's why I've not spoken my tongue around you. Your instincts to guard, to gather your people and flee, are being roused. In ancient days you would have heard us coming on the wind and secreted your villagers away. Breathe. Slow and deep."

She did as he said, pursing her lips and breathing through her mouth, trying to wait it out, hoping it would end soon. He was right, the mere sound of the ancient tongue was filling her with a bizarre kind of battle-readiness, a bone-deep urge to round up the MacKeltars and make them hide. Then to ride through the nearby towns, sounding the alarm.

Finally Dageus finished, and she heard Gwen and Chloe say simultaneously, breathlessly: "Oh. my *God*"

Gabby opened her eyes.

Drustan had risen to his feet and was scowling, an expression mirrored by his twin. Both were glaring at Adam—whom they obviously could now see. Then at their wives, then back at Adam.

Gabby absorbed the looks on Chloe's and Gwen's faces, and suddenly felt so much better about having had such a hard time ignoring the Fae all her life.

It isn't just me, she thought gratefully. She wasn't a woman of weak moral turpitude, a spineless, undisciplined fairy-abduction-waiting-to-happen; the Fae *did* have something magnetic and inordinately seductive, something women simply

couldn't resist. Adam was affecting Chloe and Gwen in the same way he affected her.

And how could he not? she thought, seeing him anew through their eyes. He was nearly six and a half feet of powerful, gold-skinned Fae prince, his body sculpted of pure muscle, his long black hair spilling to his waist in a dark silky tangle. Clad in those tattooed jeans, boots, an ivory sweater, and leather coat, gold torque gleaming at his neck, he dripped dark, otherworldly eroticism. His chiseled face was savagely beautiful, shadowed with a few-days' dark stubble. Ancient intelligence and barely banked sexual heat glittered in his exotic, dual-colored eyes. The faint fragrance of jasmine, sandalwood, and spicy man that always clung to him seemed suddenly to fill the room with his heady, intoxicating scent. She wondered, not for the first time, if there were some kind of chemical in the scent a Fae gave off that worked as an aphrodisiac on humans of the opposite sex.

He was, quite simply, a living, breathing fantasy, exuding an irresistible come-hither that held an intrinsic, unspoken caveat of danger. He had a come-and-get-me-baby-I'm-pure-trouble-and-you're-gonna-love-it kind of attitude that provoked a woman's most primitive sexual drives. Drew her even as she knew she should be running like hell in the opposite direction. Drew her, in fact, in some perverse way, *because* she knew she should be running like hell in the opposite direction.

And now that she was seeing the looks on Gwen's and Chloe's faces, she wondered how she'd managed to stay out of bed with him as long as she had.

For that matter... just how much longer she was going to be able to resist him.

For that matter, she amended irritably, as she watched Gwen

and Chloe watching him, *why* she was. It sure didn't look like *they* would be.

"Holy cow," Chloe said faintly.

"No kidding," Gwen breathed.

The sexy Fae prince flashed them a smile that was pure devilish charm, sexy and playful and mischievous, briefly catching the tip of his tongue between white teeth, before his lips curved, dark eyes sparking gold.

Gabby groaned. She choked on it hastily, camouflaging it with a dry little cough. Her own private stash of eye candy had just been made available for public consumption and she didn't like it one bit.

Apparently she wasn't the only one.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking. Dageus?" Drustan said irritably.

"Och, aye," Dageus said darkly. "You liked him better invisible too?"

"Och, aye."

"Should I curse him again?"

"Och, aye."

Adam threw back his head and laughed, eyes sparkling with gold fire. "Bloody hell, it's good to be back," he purred.

Dageus and Drustan weren't the only ones who'd like to see... er, rather, not see... Adam invisible again.

There were twenty-three females on the Keltar estate— not counting Gwen, Chloe, herself, or the cat— Gabby knew, because shortly after Adam had become visible last night, she'd met each and every one, from tiniest tot to tottering ancient.

It had begun with a plump, thirtyish maid popping in to pull the drapes for the evening and inquire if the MacKeltars "were wishing aught else?" The moment her bespectacled gaze had fallen on Adam, she'd begun stammering and tripping over her own feet. It had taken her a few moments to regain a semblance of coordination, but she'd managed to stumble from the library, nearly upsetting a lamp and a small end table in her haste.

Apparently it had been haste to alert the forces, for a veritable parade had ensued: a blushing curvaceous maid had come offering a warm-up of tea (they'd not been having any), followed by a giggling maid seeking a forgotten dust cloth (which— was anyone surprised?— was nowhere to be found), then a third one looking for a waylaid broom (yeah, right— they swept castles at midnight in Scotland— who believed that?), then a fourth, fifth, and sixth inquiring if the Crystal Chamber would do for Mr. Black (no one seemed to care what chamber might do for *her*: she half-expected to end up in an outbuilding somewhere). A

seventh, eighth, and ninth had come to announce that his chamber was ready and would he like an escort? A bath drawn? Help undressing? (Well, okay, maybe they hadn't actually asked the last, but their eyes certainly had.)

Then a half-dozen more had popped in at varying intervals to say the same things all over again, and to stress that they were there to provide "aught, *aught* at all Mr. Black might desire."

The sixteenth had come to extract two tiny girls from Adam's lap over their wailing protests (and had stayed out of his lap herself only because Adam had hastily stood), the twenty-third and final one had been old enough to be someone's great-great-grandmother, and even she'd flitted shamelessly with the "braw Mr. Black," batting nonexistent lashes above nests of wrinkles, smoothing thin white hair with a blue-veined, age-spotted hand.

And if that hadn't been enough, the castle cat, obviously female and obviously in heat, had sashayed in, tail straight up and perkily curved at the tip, and wound her furry little self sinuously around Adam's ankles, purring herself into a state of drooling, slanty-eyed bliss.

Mr. Black, my ass, she'd wanted to snap (and she liked cats, really she did; she'd certainly never wanted to kick one before, but please— even cats?), he's a fairy and I found him, so that makes him my fairy. Back off.

But everyone seemed to have forgotten her.

Even Adam. Oh, he'd kissed her again once he'd been made corporeal, and it had been another of those toe-curling, breath-stealing, possessive kisses (and it had seemed to greatly alleviate much of the Keltar twins' bristling), but then he'd gone

to sit by the fire and, shortly after that, the parade had begun and he'd hardly looked her way since.

And interspersed with the Maid Parade, Gwen and Chloe had been firing questions (bless their hearts, at least *they'd* seemed to recover nicely from Adam's impact; Gabby suspected this was due in large part to them being married to such extraordinarily sexy men), and Gabby had sat in silence, feeling as if she were slowly turning every bit as invisible as Adam had been. As if he'd not only cast off his curse but had somehow managed to cast it onto *her*.

Finally, his patience obviously fraying, Drustan had ordered the staff off to bed, firmly closed the library door, then, after a moment's pause, had locked it and leaned back against it.

Must you endure that all the time? he'd demanded incredulously of Adam.

Adam had nodded. *Though there are some*, he said with a glance in Gabby's direction, *who bash me a good one on first sight*. This said with a fine show of rubbing his lip, the one she'd split, and a faint insouciant grin.

She'd had to clench her hands into little fists to keep herself from leaping up and bashing him again. Merely for being Adam. For being so unforgivably irresistible. For being visible, damn it all. Why couldn't he have just stayed cursed? Was that so much to ask?

He'd *needed her* then. But no more. He could speak for himself; no longer was she a necessary intermediary. And there were dozens of other women who were clearly more than willing to supply anything he might *want*, at the merest seductive crook of a finger. She'd felt suddenly, inexplicably bereft.

Scowling, she'd feigned exhaustion, in no mood to deal with the feelings that watching other women fall all over him had provoked in her. In no mood to hang around and see if they might begin scaling the castle walls and breaking in through windows to get to him.

Gwen had torn herself away from the complex cosmology questions she'd been firing at Adam long enough to show her to a chamber.

Gabby'd been pleasantly surprised to find it was no outbuilding but a lovely suite of rooms on the second floor, with a stone terrace thorough French doors that overlooked a garden. After Gwen had hastened off, she'd been even more pleasantly surprised to discover a half-full decanter of wine on the bedside table.

She wasn't so happy about it this morning, however.

Nor about the fact that she'd ended up creeping out into the hall and purloining refreshments from two other "chambers" before she'd drifted off to sleep in a wine-sodden stupor.

She glanced at the bed and scowled. No wonder she felt so awful. It didn't look as if she'd done any sleeping there; it looked more like she'd done battle for what small part of the night she'd been passed out. The silky sheets were knotted, the down comforter was wadded, and two of the plush velvet bed curtains had been torn down from their hangings. She had a vague memory of being so tipsy that when she'd tried to get out of bed and go to the bathroom, she'd gotten tangled up in them and fallen.

She had another vague memory that she didn't like at all. She thought she might have cried last night. Over all kinds of stupid

things: boyfriends and blown jobs and... fairies she couldn't figure out.

She'd caught herself picking up the phone, thinking of calling her mom at one point.

Right, to say what? *Hi, Mom, I really need to talk to you about this fairy I met? Gram's dead and I don't have anyone else?*
Ha.

Come to think of it, she brooded, gingerly massaging her throbbing temples, she was afraid she might have actually managed to dial through before she hung up. She couldn't quite remember, but she'd just stepped over a phone book on the floor. And it was open to the international dialing page, and that wasn't a good sign.

With a morose little sigh, she pulled her hair back in a clip *very* gently, so all her tiny hair follicles— God, her head hurt— wouldn't scream too much in protest, then opened the door and stepped into the corridor beyond. She'd never been able to handle alcohol.

Aspirin, she needed aspirin.

A week ago, she brooded, striking off to the left (deciding after a moment's consideration that any direction was probably as good as any other in the labyrinthine maze of stone corridors) things had been so clear. She'd known exactly who she was and what her place was in the world.

She'd been an O'Callaghan, doing what she'd been raised to do, concealing herself from nasty, inhuman fairies, living a double life, and doing a bang-up job of it for the most part.

Then she'd been an O'Callaghan being tortured by one of those

nasty, inhuman fairies, albeit an impossibly seductive one, in human form.

Then she was an O'Callaghan being protected by said impossibly seductive fairy in human form from some *truly* nasty, inhuman fairies.

And now she was just Gabby, currently staying in a dreamy, magnificent castle in Scotland with a Fae prince who did all kinds of non-nasty, non-inhuman things like tearing up lists of names, and returning tadpoles to lakes, and saving people's lives.

Not to mention kissing with all the otherworldly splendor of a horny angel.

A Fae prince whom virtually every woman in the castle wanted in her bed; and, from the looks of things last night, they weren't going to waste any time trying to get him there.

And life just sucked.

* * *

Adam fisted a hand around the panties in the pocket of his coat and closed his eyes, inhaling deeply, as if from such a distance he might somehow catch the scent of Gabrielle.

No such luck; nothing but a crisp Highland wind rushing by as

he pounded across the field on the back of a snorting black stallion. And though the breeze was sweet, it was far from the sensual perfume of Gabrielle's private heat.

Those silky pink panties were one of several things he'd not been willing to leave behind in the hotel room. He'd only removed them from his pocket and tucked them in his bag because he'd planned on getting naked with his *Sidhe-seer*, and he'd not wanted to have to explain why he had a pair of her panties on his person, had she discovered them. He wasn't certain that was a thing a woman could appreciate.

Ah, but a man did. The soft, sweet, sultry scent of a woman caught on a silky bit of fabric that slipped so intimately between her legs, rubbing against that luscious mound, carrying that unique fragrance a woman only had *there*. A man couldn't breathe of such a scent behind a woman's ear or in the soft hollow of her throat, in her hair or in the small of her back.

Only if he was her lover did a man get to know that scent.

He'd known it since the night he'd pilfered her panties, and he'd been so damn close to it a few nights past. He was dying of impatience, about to explode if he didn't get to bury his face in it soon.

Not the panties. The real thing. Between her thighs, his face, his tongue, not just inhaling, but tasting. Feeling her writhe beneath him in ecstasy, feeling her come against his mouth. Lapping with his tongue, bringing her to peak again and again. Showing her all the pleasure he could give her, binding her to him in the most ancient and sure way a man could.

Unfortunately, other things had demanded his attention.

Not only had Gwen and Chloe hammered him with all manner of questions (many of which he couldn't find the words in their language to answer anyway, and some of which he'd refused to answer because such knowledge was still too far in mankind's future) but Dageus and Drustan had waited patiently until the wee hours for their wives to wind down and depart, then begun with questions of their own. He'd filled them in on all that had transpired, from the High Council decreeing Dageus be subjected to trial by blood, to his current straits.

Then, all-too-humanly tired, frustrated that Gabrielle was sleeping somewhere in the sprawling castle without him—they'd not been apart more than a few necessary minutes in days—he'd rather gracelessly imparted what he'd come for, and the twins had been less than thrilled.

You want us to bring down the walls between Man and Faery?
Drustan had roared, *Are you blethering mad?*

Not that we aren't grateful for all you're done for us, Dageus had hastened to say, but you just told us your queen nigh destroyed our entire clan because I broke an oath, now you're asking us to do it again?

Hence, after a deep, dreamless sleep of a mere few hours (no matter that he was human in body, his Tuatha Dé mind still didn't dream), he *still* wasn't with his *Sidhe-seer* but out riding with the Keltar twins, as he had been all morning, pounding across the lush terrain, rehashing over and over again that he wasn't *really* asking them to break their oaths, he was only asking them to... delay fulfilling them.

Until the last possible minute.

Assuring them it would never go that far.

Realizing that were they to refuse him for any reason, he would simply sift stealthily up behind them and incapacitate them (and their descendant Christopher, who was also a Druid) if he had to, until Lughnassadh had passed. Because, by Danu, he *would* stop Darroc and he *would* preserve Aoibheal's reign and he *would* regain his power and he *would* see to Gabrielle's safety for the rest of forever.

* * *

In her defense— and all people were entitled to one, no matter how reprehensible their actions; that was one of the first things a person learned in law school— Gabby didn't plan to do it. There was no malice aforethought. Wanton and willful disregard? She might plead to that. But not to premeditation.

She was a good person. Really. Probably as much as ninety-four percent of the time.

Surely she could be forgiven for the other six percent?

It wasn't as if she'd left her room *looking* for the opportunity to malign anyone or indulge in a bit of character assassination.

But the opportunity presented itself (as wily opportunities to damn oneself frequently do), and she was hungover, and for the first time in more days than she cared to count, Adam hadn't been waiting with coffee for her the moment she'd opened her eyes. No, Adam had been God-only-knew-where, with God-

only-knew-what-harem in simpering, adoring attendance. And she was grumpy, caffeine-deprived, and lost in the winding corridors of the castle.

So when she came up on the rear of a cluster of maids breathlessly discussing "Mr. Black" as they fake-dusted their way down the corridor, something with a small, mean soul reared its ugly head, baring pointy little teeth.

It didn't help that all five maids were young and attractive: a tall, leggy brunette, a shorter curvy brunette, a voluptuous redhead, and two willowy blondes. Nor that they were currently debating whether Adam was a foreplay man or a get-right-to-it kind of guy.

"Well, he likes foreplay," she was startled to hear herself say much too sweetly, "but he's so terrible at it that it makes you *wish* he were a wham-bam kind of man."

Five women turned to gape at her.

The leggy brunette regarded her skeptically. That she spoke with a sweet Scottish lilt only irritated Gabby even more. "Mr. Black? I'll not be believing that. That braw man's a lass's dream."

"A really *bad* dream maybe," Gabby heard her wayward, lying lips say. "The man can't even kiss."

"What do you mean?" the brunette demanded.

"Drool," Gabby said succinctly.

" 'Drool'?" the brunette echoed, frowning.

Gabby nodded, accepting that it was too late. She was in it, and she may as well do it up right and see it through to a Big Finish.

What she might lack in character, she'd make up for with commitment. "Have you ever kissed someone who... well, it's like they open their mouth too much? And they get your face all wet, and by the time they're done kissing you, all you really want is a towel?"

The redhead nodded emphatically. "Aye, I have. Young Jamie down at the Haverton's pub." She made a face. "Ugh. It's disgusting. He slobbers."

"That's how Mr. Black kisses?" a slender blonde exclaimed.

"Worse." Gabby lied shamelessly. "He hardly ever brushes his teeth, and I swear the man wouldn't know what dental floss was if you tied a little ribbon of it smack around his itty-bitty, er... well, that's another matter. But, no, I shouldn't..."

"Nay, you should, you most certainly should!" a blonde exclaimed.

"Aye, don't be stopping there," the short brunette chimed in.

"You wouldn't be meaning his winkie, would you?" the redhead said faintly. "Oh, say it isn't so!"

Gabby nodded sadly. "I'm afraid it is."

"Just how itty and bitty?" the leggy brunette demanded.

"Well," Gabby said, sighing, "you know how big and tall he is?"

Five heads bobbed.

She edged closer, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Let's just say he's not in proportion."

"No!" they exclaimed again.

"Afraid so." She could have left it at that, *should* have left it at that, but the green-eyed monster had a fistful of her hair, not to mention control of her lips. She was appalled to hear herself say "Take my word for it, the only one Mr. Happy is making happy is himself."

The leggy brunette eyed her suspiciously. "Nay, I'll hear none of this. Last eve I saw the bulge— "

"Socks," Gabby cut her off, barely managing to conceal her scowl. *How dare that woman be checking out Adam's bulge? I've hardly even given myself permission to do that.* "He stuffs socks down his pants. Though he prefers a banana if a nice green one is available. Says it gives the best firm impression. Says that since women wear Wonderbras, why shouldn't men enhance themselves too?"

"No!" Scandalized, the maids twittered, exchanging glances among themselves.

Gabby nodded. "It's true. I seriously considered suing the man for misrepresentation of material fact. Clothed, he might look like a dream, but out of those clothes, he's a nightmare."

The maids were all staring at her with varying degrees of shock and disappointment. Only the leggy brunette was still looking somewhat skeptical.

Gabby made a mental note to swipe a few bananas and deposit them in his room. She might have giggled at the thought had she not been so horrified with herself. Never in her life had she sunk to such depths. And apparently she wasn't quite done yet.

"You haven't noticed any bananas missing from the kitchen, have you? I'd keep a close eye on them if I were you. You might

want to watch the sausages too."

And with that, she swept past them. Well, in as much as a hungover woman in jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes (damn it, *why* hadn't she taken the slinky dress and heels from Macy's when she'd had the chance?) was capable of sweeping.

* * *

"For Christ's sake, Drustan," Adam said irritably, shifting in the saddle, trying to find a more comfortable position, knowing there wasn't one, because saddles hadn't been designed for men with immortal hard-ons, "you didn't even know that the purpose of your four feast day rituals was to uphold the walls between our realms until I told you. You thought they were just a heralding of the change of season and an affirmation of your commitment to The Compact."

"I ken it, and that fashes me more than a wee," Drustan exploded. "What if, in our ignorance, we'd failed to perform them in the past?"

"First of all, you never fail to keep an oath," Adam muttered darkly, "so I highly doubt that would ever have become an issue. Even if your whole clan were somehow wiped out, your bloody ghost would probably come back and bloody dance around the bloody stones. Second, it's not my fault your clan misplaced The Compact for so many centuries and you forgot the meaning

behind the rituals. And third— this is really the only relevant part and it's what I keep telling you— " Adam said, enunciating each word tightly. Christ, his body hurt with wanting his *Sidhe-seer*. She was on safe ground. It was time. It was *past* time to make her his. How long had they been separated now? Fifteen mortal hours? It felt like a century. His skin was cold where, for the past few days, she'd been constantly pressed against him. "The queen will come, Drustan. She'll never let the walls come down. She'll come, demanding to know why you're not performing the ritual. Then I'll tell her about Darroc and all will be well. You'll perform the rites long before your twenty-four-hour window of time is up. And she'll be grateful, she *won't* be angry with you."

Christ, they'd been over this a dozen times. The Keltar Druids had from midnight on the dawning of the feast days of Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnassadh, and Samhain to midnight at the close of the feast day, to perform the necessary rituals. During that time the walls would thin, but they wouldn't collapse completely until midnight on the close of. For millennia uncounted, the Keltar had always performed their rituals at midnight on the dawning of.

When they failed to do so this upcoming Lughnassadh, once the walls began to thin, Aoibheal would appear, demanding to know what was going on. Adam was willing to bet she'd show by noon or shortly thereafter. There was no way she'd let the Isle of Morar be exposed, no way she'd let Fae realms rise up in the midst of human ones.

This was his one sure way to force the queen to appear. To bring down the walls between realms.

"And furthermore," he added darkly, "if you don't do this for

me, there's not going to be any frigging Compact to uphold anymore. If Darroc overthrows the queen, he'll spill mortal blood in a heartbeat. Then you won't have to bother with your oaths; there won't *be* any walls between realms. You'll have a Tuatha Dé war on your hands, with the Unseelie roaming free in your world, and, believe me, the damage they could do in a mere matter of days would make your Black Plague seem like a pesky cold. In fact," he growled, "it will probably be *your* mortal blood Darroc will spill first, because he won't like that you possess so much knowledge of our ways. The two of you are a threat he'll want removed immediately."

"There is that." Dageus said, nodding his agreement and looking pointedly at Drustan.

"Is he always such a stick in the mud?" Adam demanded of Dageus, shooting a dark look at Drustan.

"Drustan's ever been overbroody about oaths and whatnot," Dageus said dryly.

"And it's a blethering good thing one of us is." Drustan said, casting Dageus a glare.

"Right, because if we *both* were, you'd be dead. Och, I forgot, so would I," Dageus said mildly.

Drustan's lips twitched for a moment, then he snorted and gave in to a laugh. "Point ceded, brother. Smartass."

"Learning more words from your wee wife, I see," Dageus noted, with an amused lift of a brow.

* * *

"I just did something so awful that I'm not sure I even know who I am anymore," Gabby blurted without preamble when she stumbled upon Gwen and Chloe MacKeltar; *finally* she'd found the center of the castle.

She hadn't meant to tell them that— really, she hardly even knew them, other than their brief conversation last night, which had consisted primarily of a recounting of recent events, nothing personal— but her mouth seemed to have its own bizarre agenda this morning, and she figured if she tried to zip it, she might explode.

Or worse, go find more wine, and she knew that was a really, really bad idea.

The MacKeltar wives were cozily ensconced in overstuffed chairs in a bright sunny room that opened off the second floor of the great hall, the east wall a bank of unbroken glass overlooking a lush tumble of gardens. They blinked up at her with warm smiles.

"Oh, come in! We were just talking about you." Chloe said, beaming, and patting a chair beside her. "Please join us. Have you had breakfast yet? There's coffee and pastries"— she waved a hand at the side table— "dig in. Gwen and I always breakfast in the solar; you can find us here every morning. We wanted to wake you, but Adam insisted we let you sleep. Said you hadn't gotten the chance to sleep in a real bed for a while."

The permanent scowl that seemed to have taken possession of

Gabby's face eased a bit. He hadn't brought her coffee, but at least he'd *thought* of her. "Where is he anyway?" she asked peevishly, reaching for a buttery, golden-crust scone.

"He went riding with Drustan and Dageus early this morning," Gwen replied. "They were talking nonstop in Gaelic as they rode out and it sounded pretty intense, so I think they might be gone awhile. What did you do that's so awful?" she asked avidly, plucking a clean cup from the table and offering it to her.

Sinking into a chair next to Chloe, Gabby poured herself a cup of coffee, heaped in sugar, and sipped greedily. Nice and strong, she noticed. *Thank you, God.* They waited patiently while she fortified herself, though by the time she'd finished her second scone, Gwen was tapping her fingernails against her cup.

Drawing a deep breath, Gabby began. Encouraged by their sympathetic responses, she ended up confiding the whole sordid debacle. Beginning with too much wine, skimming over the crying and the almost-phone-call, and ultimately to her confrontation with a contingent of the Maid Parade.

By the time she'd finished, Gwen and Chloe were laughing so hard they were wiping tears from their eyes.

"I can't believe I did it," Gabby said for the dozenth time. Blessed caffeine was thrumming through her veins, the scones had soaked up most of the sick feeling in her stomach, and the jackhammers in her head had died down to a dull tapping. She was beginning to think she might actually be able to take a shower sometime today. The mere thought of one when she'd awakened, the mere idea of little beads of water making contact with her tender scalp, had been more than she could bear.

"Bananas." she said, appalled. "Do you believe I said that? I've never done anything like that. I don't know what got into me."

The moment she said "bananas" her hostesses stalled laughing all over again, holding their stomachs.

A very small, though bone-deep-embarrassed, smile curved Gabby's lips as she watched them laugh. It was kind of funny, or at least it would have been if it had been someone else who'd behaved so moronically. If her friend Elizabeth had done something so idiotic, she'd have laughed about it for months.

When they finally sobered, Chloe said softly, "Oh, please. What got into you was that last night every woman in the castle was looking at your man like he was their favorite kind of ice cream and they couldn't wait to devour him. Believe me, I can relate. Merely walking down a crowded street with Dageus can make me crazy some days. He and Drustan are hardly your average twenty-first-century men; women go nuts over them. The last time we were in Inverness some crazy romance author on a tour of the Highlands tried to get Dageus to model for the cover of one of her books."

Gwen nodded with a wry look. "It does get old. I nearly got into a bit of a tussle in a spotting goods store with a saleswoman."

But Gabby heard only one thing. "He's not my man," she told Chloe tightly. And wasn't that just the crux of the problem? "As a matter of fact," she added broodingly, "he's not really even a man at all."

"What on earth do you mean by that?" Gwen exclaimed.

"He's a *fairy*, Gwen." She couldn't believe she had to point out the obvious. Hadn't somebody told her last night that Gwen was a brilliant physicist?

"A male Tuatha Dé," Gwen corrected. "That's how we think of

them. Calling them fairies makes them sound like diminutive little things with wings. And they're not. They're just a different, highly advanced civilization, a race with vastly superior technology, but Adam's still every bit a man. Heavens, don't you see how he looks at you? If you have any doubt about what he is, look at that. That's pure man and nothing but."

Gabby went very still. "How does he look at me?"

Gwen and Chloe exchanged incredulous glances.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Chloe exclaimed, "she's as bad as I was, isn't she, Gwen?"

"I think she might actually be worse," Gwen said dryly. "It's just a good thing the men are off elsewhere, because I can see we need to have a good long girl talk."

* * *

They rode for hours. It was early afternoon by the time they drew their mounts to a halt at the top of a vast, sweeping ridge. The sun had passed midpoint and begun its descent, and Adam was seething with silent impatience.

Still, no matter his mood, it was impossible to remain unaffected by the beauty of the Highlands. From their lofty vantage, the whole vale was spread beneath them like a scooped-out bowl between bens, at the heart of which sprawled

Castle Keltar, looking tiny and faraway. Miles and miles of untamed, lush country stretched before them, dusted with the soft pastels of summer.

Adam inhaled deeply. How he loved this land. He'd always understood why the Scots had fought so fiercely to keep it. "Ah, she's lovely," he said softly, "Scotia is."

"Aye," Dageus agreed.

Drustan grunted, then sighed gustily, as if hours of talking and debating hadn't done it, but Adam's appreciation of their land had somehow resolved things for him. "We'll do it, Old One," he said. Grumpily. Clearly at irreconcilable odds with oath-breaking but conceding the necessity of it.

A quiet satisfaction spread through Adam's body.

That was what he'd been waiting to hear; the only thing that had been keeping him out on a horse, too far away from his woman. And with that victory, his thoughts turned with sharp focus to Gabrielle.

He knew just what gifts he would give her tonight. Tonight he would finally see his *ka-lyrra* in something besides jeans. Then in nothing at all.

Now he had seven glorious days stretching from here to Lughnassadh that he could spend with her, on safe ground, with no pressing concerns. Only the concern of sealing his claim to her. Of winning her body, mind, and soul. His desire for her was no longer about getting to experience sex in human form, it was only and all about simply getting inside her. Making her his. Being the one to turn those green-gold eyes all dreamy-sexy, the one to make her whimper, the one to make her shudder with

pleasure. Who cared what form he wore, so long as he had her in his bed?

"Or, rather, not do it," Dageus was saying, when Adam tuned back in. "We'll sit back and let the walls come down. And we'll speak with our descendant Christopher and see to it he agrees."

Adam inclined his head, meeting the Highlanders' gazes with unspoken thanks.

"But hear this, Adam Black." Drustan added, "if all hell is to break loose a sennight hence, we'll be looking for you to fight at our side. We'll be expecting you to have our backs, as we'll be having yours."

Adam inhaled sharply as an emotion unfamiliar to him expanded in his chest. Drustan was looking at him as if he were just another man, a warrior to wage battle with them, to stand and hold against whatever may come. And he realized that beside them and beside his petite *ka-lyrra* he would stand. Even, if need be, against his queen.

"You have my word," he said quietly.

And when they both murmured swift acceptance of his pledge, that uncommon sensation, that strange pressure behind his sternum, expanded even more.

* * *

Gwen couldn't have been more right, Gabby reflected later that afternoon as she stepped out of the shower— she'd definitely needed some girl talk.

They'd talked for hours, whiling away the morning and most of the afternoon. The three of them had hit it off like old friends. She hadn't realized how desperately she'd needed to discuss things with someone. She'd been all alone with her thoughts since the moment Adam had burst into her life, and so much had happened so fast, and she'd not worked her way through any of it.

Gwen and Chloe had helped immensely. They were of the same age, and were a lot like her friend Elizabeth: smart (almost *too* smart), funny in a self-deprecating way, with big, generous hearts. And over the course of the day the three of them had curled lazily in the sunshine in the solar, talking nonstop.

Gwen and Chloe had taken turns telling their stories about how they'd met their husbands, and Gabby had listened, entranced.

Gwen had met Drustan first. She'd been on a holiday in Scotland when she'd fallen down a ravine and plunged through the bottom of the rocky crevice into a forgotten cave, only to land on an enchanted, slumbering Highlander from the sixteenth century (talk about *falling* for a guy). He'd sent her back in time to save him. But all hadn't gone well, and Dageus had broken his oaths to save Drustan's life so he and Gwen could be reunited.

And then Chloe had stumbled upon Dageus, or rather been stumbled upon by him, while he'd been holed up in a luxurious penthouse in Manhattan, searching ancient texts, trying to find a way to free himself from the thirteen evil souls possessing him.

Gwen had thought Drustan mentally unbalanced when she'd met him, with his talk of time travel and curses.

Chloe had thought Dageus a nefarious thief and hopeless womanizer. And she'd come to find out that he was possessed by purest evil.

Both had taken chances with their hearts, immense chances, against immense odds.

And both were deliriously in love, happily married, and living a dream. A dream that had tugged painfully at her heart when Gwen had brought her tiny, beautiful dark-haired twin daughters in to nurse, and Chloe had blushinglly confided that she was expecting too.

And she'd not missed Adam's part in Chloe's happiness. Chloe had told her all that had happened in those dusty catacombs: about the showdown with the sect of the Draghar, how Dageus had taken a mortal wound in the process of defeating them and saving her.

How she'd thought she'd lost her Highland love forever, and would have, if Adam hadn't given of his own life force to bring him back from the brink of death and see him returned to her.

That bore a lot of fascinated pondering in Gabby's mind. Just what motives had he been driven by? What thoughts had been going on in that beautiful dark head, behind those timeless, ancient eyes? What deep, unspoken feelings? Why would he stir himself to return a human man to his human lover? And at such a price?

For Chloe had also told her that Dageus had confided (when he'd finally come to bed for a few hours early that morning) that

the reason Adam had been punished by his queen was because of his intervention to save the MacKeltars.

It was yet another thing he'd not told her— refusing to answer when she'd asked him twice before— but she could hardly blame him, because she'd not have believed it then.

She believed it now. And that knowledge was doing crazy things to her heart.

Now more than ever she wanted to know— who was Adam Black? Who was this big, underdisclosing, intensely sexual, surprisingly gentle Fae who seemed to spend more time with humans than with his own race? This Fae eminently capable of force, who never forced? This Fae who'd taken a stand for humans against his own kind?

More important, was all that fierce, guarded emotion in him reachable by a mortal woman?

That was the question that was making her feel shaky clear down to her toes. He was looking like every inch her fantasy prince.

And it was scaring the hell out of her.

Before the afternoon was over, Gabby told her story in its entirety as well. It had been impossible not to. Gwen and Chloe were women who'd endured their own epidemics of otherworldly events; there'd been no need to hold anything back. Being a *Sidhe-seer* was only a moderately unusual thing from their perspective; it hardly even signified.

She'd told them how she'd been raised to fear the Fae, how her mom had left because she couldn't deal with her having the vision, how-Gram had raised her, taught her to conceal her

"gift." She'd told them what the O'Callaghan *Books* said about the Fae, and about how wrong she'd realized those books were—at least about Adam.

She'd told them how she'd given herself away that night she'd seen him, how he'd tracked her, and the many things he'd done since.

She'd finally admitted the fear she'd not, until that moment, admitted even to herself. That she would somehow survive all this, fall head over heels for him, only— unlike in her teenage fantasies— there would be no Happily-Ever-After. He would regain his immortality, secure her safety as he'd promised, then return to the Fae realm, and that would be that. After all, the universe would again be his oyster and, in the cosmic scheme of things, Gabby knew she was nobody's pearl.

It would be Game Over. Time up. No extended play. Just the haunting taste of an all-too-brief fairy tale left on her tongue, ruining her appetite for reality forever.

Well, first of all, Chloe had said gently, I think it's too late, sweetie: you're already fallen.

Gwen had nodded agreement. *But, second and most important, Gabby, she'd said softly, the question you must ask yourself isn't, will you get a Happily-Ever-After? The question you need to ask yourself is, will you be able to live with yourself if you don't let yourself have a happy-now, and end up having had nothing at all?*

Gabby took her time with her hair and makeup that evening, a luxury she'd not been able to indulge for days. While they'd been traveling and sifting about, on those rare occasions she'd glimpsed a mirror— usually during a quick duck into a public rest room— she hadn't liked what she'd seen, so she'd not lingered. But tonight she had the assurance that they were on safe ground, there would be no unceremonious dips in lakes or falls from steeples, and she was determined to look good for a change.

Aspirin and a long hot shower had scalded away the last of her hangover. Chloe had invited her to drop by her chambers before dinner so they could find her something to wear, as they were nearly the same size. She was looking forward to wearing something besides jeans. Okay, she was looking forward to looking pretty around Adam; there, she'd admitted it. Really, a woman would have to be dead *not* to want to look good around him.

She brushed on lipstick and ran her fingers through her hair, letting it spill down her back, tugging a few long bangs to spike softly around her eyes. A smudge of smoky shadow at her eyes, a dab of mascara. A hint of shiny gloss on her mouth, enough to catch the light and do interesting things with it. Enough to draw a man's notice.

And that, she decided, eyeing herself in the mirror, was as good as Gabby got. Clothes would have to do the rest; she just hoped Chloe had something ultrafeminine and a smidgen provocative that she could borrow.

Opening the bathroom door, she stepped out into the adjoining bedchamber.

And froze.

Impossible, she thought, staring at the canopied bed.

Not that the velvet drapes were hung again or that the bed was neatly made— that was perfectly possible. A maid had obviously stopped in while she'd been in the shower, shaving her legs, smoothing on lotion, and fussing with cosmetics.

What *wasn't* possible was the slinky black dress she'd spent long minutes sighing over so wistfully at Macy's that was currently hanging between those drapes.

Nor, she thought, stunned, moving closer to the bed, the dainty heels she'd eyed so covetously.

Nor, she thought, eyes widening, that sinful bit of lacy bra and panties in her favorite shade of pale pink.

And, oh, my God, she thought breathlessly, *is that a box from Tiffany's?*

Clutching the lapels of her bathrobe, she glanced around the room.

There was no sign of him.

But on the air, faint yet unmistakable, was just a hint of the exotic scent of jasmine and sandalwood and spicy, seductive

man, and she realized he'd probably sifted out mere moments ago while she'd been finishing up her makeup.

She reached for the box with trembling hands, opened it, and gasped, so stunned that she fumbled and nearly dropped it.

Nestled on a bed of velvet was a diamond choker and matching earrings, and she knew exactly where she'd last seen them. It had been back in Cincinnati, the night he'd brought her dinner from Jean-Robert at Pigalls. She'd left the office late, taken her usual path past Tiffany's to collect her car from the corner lot. There'd been a new-window display up, and she'd been briefly captivated by the elegance of the simply set stones. She'd paused, gazing in the window at the matching pieces. Wondering, with feminine curiosity, what kind of man showered what kind of woman with such jewels. Wondering if she'd ever get so much as a diamond ring on her finger, or even a plain wedding band.

He must have been somewhere behind her, watching her.

Just as he must have been at Macy's.

I take care of what is mine, he'd told her when he'd handed her the keys to the BMW.

Indeed.

As she lifted the glittering strand of diamonds from the box, a small slip of paper fell out. She caught it as it wafted toward the floor.

Four words in ancient script, an arrogantly slanted scrawl.

Accept these, accept me.

Well, she thought, blinking, that was certainly direct and to the

point.

She held the glittering stones in her hands for a long time, looking at them but not really seeing them. No longer really thinking but opening her heart, feeling, wondering. Hearing an echo of Gwen's words: *Will you be able to live with yourself if you don't let yourself have a happy-now, and end up having had nothing at all?*

Eventually she placed the box back on the bed and slipped on the panties and bra.

Stepped into the clingy black dress, tugged it over her hips, and zipped the tiny side zipper.

Perched on the edge of the bed, she strapped on the dainty, sexy shoes.

Then she reached for the box, donned the earrings, and fastened the strand of cool stones around her throat.

* * *

Adam had just stepped out of the shower when he heard a soft tap on his bedchamber door.

He hoped like bloody hell it wasn't another maid. When he'd returned from his ride, there'd been dozens of them loitering about in the great hall. While he was accustomed to women

throwing themselves at him, he wasn't accustomed to them staring with such unnerving intensity directly at his crotch.

Hard. As if they were trying to see through the leather to what lay beneath, or rather, stood beneath, because the damn thing was never going to go down until he'd had Gabrielle beneath him at least a hundred times.

"Who is it?" he called warily.

When he heard the soft reply, his eyes flared, then narrowed. With a lazy smile and slow deliberation, he dropped the towel he'd just knotted loosely about his waist.

"No holds barred tonight, *ka-lyrra*," he murmured, too soft for her to hear. He'd not thought to see her until dinner. But she was here, outside his door, outside his bedchamber. She might as well have strolled up to the lion's lair, nicely basted in fresh, warm blood.

His mouth was suddenly fiercely dry, his breathing harsh and shallow.

Would she be wearing them? Was she ready to admit? To take him? This woman who'd been raised on the worst tales of him, some of which were completely true?

And she *knew* that. She knew he'd razed the Highlands after Morganna; he'd seen the look on her face when she'd asked him about the date Morganna had died. She knew that, for all the things that were inaccurate in her *Books*, there were some that weren't. She knew that in nearly six thousand years he'd done a thing or two to merit some of the bad press he'd received. Gabrielle was no fool.

Had she seen past it? Had she seen *him*?

Would she have those damn diamonds on? He was almost afraid to open the door and see, so badly did he want her, given completely, without reservation, tonight, now, this moment. He needed it. Felt like he'd been waiting six thousand years for it. Christ, what was happening to him? Had he ever felt like this before?

He realized he was glaring at the door and had no idea how long he'd been doing it. He shook his head, muttering a curse at his idiocy. For Christ's sake, he was Adam Black. Not some bumbling mortal lad.

"Come in," he called, and if it came out a little more guttural than usual, he deigned not to notice. He stood at his full height of six feet four and a half inches, legs splayed, arms folded over his chest, wearing nothing but the ancient gold adornments of his royal house.

The door opened slowly— he felt like it was opening in slow frigging motion— but then there she was, and he felt as if someone had slammed a fist into his gut.

He was pleased to see she appeared to be suffering the same sensation.

She froze, her lovely green-gold eyes flying wide. "Y-y-you're... n-n—" she sputtered. Tried again, "Oh. Heavens. My. Goodness." Wet her lips. Took a deep breath. "*Holy shit, you're naked* And oh— OH!" Her gaze dipped then flew back up to his face, and her eyes went ever wider.

A smile of pure masculine triumph curved his lips. "Ah, yes," he purred. "And you, my sweet Gabrielle, are wearing my diamonds."

* * *

Gabby stood in the doorway, her heart hammering wildly.

Two-hundred-pounds-plus of gorgeous naked man stood before her, and he was so savagely, intensely beautiful that she couldn't tear her gaze away. Had to remind herself that oxygen was good for a girl, so *breathe, O'Callaghan*. She looked up and down, up and down again, little breaths slamming together in her throat.

Abruptly, she knew that after this night she was never going to be the same again. Nothing was ever going to be the same. Oh, yes, the man could define himself as the dawning of an epoch if he wanted to. There was, quite simply, before Adam and after Adam.

He stepped forward, moving with sleek animal grace, a predatory glint in his dark gaze. He was hunter and she was food. And from the look in his eyes he was going to devour her.

He stalked to her, towering over her, staring down, reaching out to lightly touch the choker at her neck with his fingertips. "You know what this means," he said softly, intensely. "Mine. You accept it. You're mine. No, shush." He pressed a finger to her lips. "Don't say a word. Just let me look at you. I've been waiting to see you in this dress."

Circling behind her, he pushed the door gently closed, and she

heard the metallic clicking of tumblers as he locked it. He padded slowly around her.

"Christ, you're beautiful, Gabrielle. Do you know how badly I want you? Do you know what fantasies I've been playing through my mind about you? Do you know how many times I jacked off, trying to get rid of this bloody eternal hard-on? Knowing that the only thing that was going to help was you?"

He padded another slow naked circle around her. "And now here you are. In my chambers. Locked in. And you're not getting out until I say you are. And I may never say it."

He paused behind her, leaned close, front to her backside, rubbed his cock against her ass in that sexy dress. The dress looked every bit as good on her as he'd known it would, clinging to every lush curve. Felt good too. Breath hissed between his teeth at the contact; it was so excruciatingly pleasurable that it burned. He sucked in a sharp breath and yanked himself back, knowing that if he touched her again like that it would be all over.

"And those shoes," he purred his gaze dropping down over her ass, down the shapely curves of the backs of her thighs, to her slender ankles with those little dainty straps tied around them.

"I watched you looking at them in Macy's. You've got the sweetest legs and ass, Gabrielle. When I first saw you in Cincinnati, you had on shorts and sandals on your feet. Even your painted little toes turned me on."

He circled around in front of her. Her eyes were wide, deliriously unfocused. Her lips were parted and she was panting softly, her chest rising and falling gently.

He pressed the tip of his finger to her lips, pushed inside. She closed those lush lips on it, sucking, and such raw heat lanced through him that, for a moment, he couldn't move. He finally managed to withdraw his finger, sliding it slowly from that luscious pucker, then traced a damp path over the shape of her mouth, across her jaw, down her neck, to the lush valley of her cleavage.

He should seduce her, he should woo her with kisses, he should gently entice, lead her slowly yet inexorably down the path to her ultimate and costly capitulation.

But it was too late; he'd waited too long, and there was a thing he could no longer deny himself. A thing he'd been thinking about too much while riding today. A thing he needed. Right now. And it pissed him off, the hold it had on him, how savagely he wanted it. To know the taste of her, to have her on his tongue, captured in his immortal memory. If somehow, for some reason, she managed to stop him this night, at least he'd have gotten this.

"For the record, Irish," he informed her tightly, just in case she got the wrong idea, "I kneel to no one." Then he dropped to his knees at her feet, shoved her dress up, gathered a fistful of silky material in each hand, and pushed her back against the door, pinning her to it by the fabric.

Gabby leaned weakly against the door, gasping for breath. The exotic scent of him was filling her nostrils, making her dizzy. Merely looking at him naked had gotten her so intensely aroused that she knew what he was about to find— she was wet; she was so wet she was almost embarrassed by it. She was ready right now, she didn't even need a kiss, or any other foreplay, for that matter. She certainly didn't know if she could survive what

it looked like he was about to do. She just wanted him inside her. When he'd circled her like some big dark beast, talking to her, telling her how much he wanted her, she'd nearly begun begging.

And now he was on his knees between her legs, her dress nicked up to her waist, exposing her to him, naked but for a lacy scrap of silk slipping between her legs.

Oops, make that naked, she amended with a half-laugh, half-sob, as he dragged that lacy bit of fabric from her body with his teeth, tugging it down, down, teeth grazing her lightly, pausing to nip, scattering tiny little love bites over her skin, sending waves of chills skittering up her spine.

She felt drugged, drunken, intoxicated on passion. She had no idea how she'd managed to put him off this long, or why, and was suddenly astounded at how much time she'd wasted.

"I'm going to taste every inch of you before this night is through," he purred.

And then he began making good on that promise, with long, hot, velvety strokes of his tongue up the insides of her thighs. Lazy sweet nips on the plump inner parts of her legs, hot, openmouthed kisses on the delicate skin of her hips. He left no inch of her skin unkissed, unnibbled.

Then a hand was pushing her legs apart and his dark head was between them. When he flicked his tongue over the tiny bud nestled in soft folds, she grabbed great fistfuls of his silky, dark hair and shuddered, leaning weakly-back against the door.

"Stay standing, *ka-lyrra*. If those sweet knees give out and you come down on the floor, I'll fuck you right there."

She let her knees buckle instantly, barely smothering a laugh.

"Aw, bloody *hell*, Gabrielle, I wanted this to *last*," he cursed, rolling instantly with her, catching her, going down beneath her to absorb the impact of her tumble.

But she was beyond niceties, she'd been waiting a lifetime for this. Couldn't wait one moment more. Sprawled atop his great, big, naked body, she wriggled against him until she'd cinched his hot, hard erection right where she wanted it, the swollen ridge of him riding with delicious friction against her. God, she was so close, a few good rubs...

"Oh, no," he hissed, instantly understanding. "You are *not* getting yourself there. Not without me inside you the first time."

"Then I'd suggest," she panted, "you hurry up and get inside me."

He made a choking sound, a husky, erotic-sounding laugh-growl. "Ah, Gabrielle," he purred, gripping her by the hips and rolling her beneath him on the soft carpet. "I'm never going to get enough of you, am I?"

"Not if you keep going so *slow*," she snapped testily.

"Spread your legs," he demanded. He stretched his body the full length of hers, supporting his weight on his forearms, kneeling her legs wider for him. "Lift them around my hips."

She obeyed instantly.

"Lock your ankles. This isn't going to be easy."

A delirious little shiver rocked her at his words. She knew that. She'd known it the first time she'd felt him pressed up against her bottom, there in Cincinnati, the morning he'd burst through

her door, and it had been one of the things wreaking havoc with her senses ever since. All of her boyfriends had been big, tall men. She liked big men, always had, liked a bit of dominance. And Adam Black was big and bad to the bone, all around. She'd told the maids the truth, sort of; he *wasn't* in proportion, he was larger there than a woman would expect. "Somehow. I don't think anything about you is ever easy," she managed to gasp out.

"No it's not, but I think easy would bore you, *ka-lyrra*. I promise you I'll never bore you."

And then his hand was between her legs, a finger slipping into her sleek heat, pressing in, pressing upward, searching for her barrier. Then two fingers, and she was only dimly aware when he breached the thin membrane, the fleeting pain eclipsed by the pleasure of him moving inside her. Her hips arched helplessly up, wanting more, needing, aching for all of him.

And then his hand was gone and the thick head of his penis was nudging against her soft folds, and he was pushing himself inside her. She mewled, a whimper of distress, trying to adjust, wiggling, trying to accept, but he was too big and she was too tight.

"Easy, Gabrielle. Relax," he gritted.

She tried, but she couldn't; it was instinctive to resist, and they waged a silent sexual battle for a few moments, where he hardly gained another inch. Her muscles were bearing down on him, resisting the steely intrusion.

He sucked in a hissing breath through clenched teeth.

"Gabrielle, you're *killing* me; you have to let me in."

"I'm *trying*," she wailed.

With a muffled curse, he abruptly shifted her, pushing her legs apart and up, resting her ankles on his shoulders, tilting her pelvis up and back, ruthlessly exposing her.

Fisting a hand in her hair close to her scalp, he tugged her head back and slanted his mouth hard over hers, taking her in a deep, soul-claiming kiss, his hot, velvety tongue probing, retreating. She was too stunned by the kiss, by the fierce, possessive savagery of it, to tense when he impaled her, which was, she realized, precisely why he'd done it.

He drove himself deep inside her with one slow, smooth, relentless penetration, filling her so completely that she screamed into his mouth, but he kept his lips sealed over hers, swallowing the cry. He stayed like that for long minutes, in her to the hilt, thoroughly invading every soft warm crevice of her, but not moving, just kissing her, his hot tongue tangling with hers. He was so large that it took long minutes for her to adjust, to ease and accommodate. Long minutes while he stayed still, occupying his territory, not surveying the perimeters until she was whimpering against his lips, begging him to move. Now that the pressure felt good, she was feeling an entirely different kind of pressure, that needed *lots* of moving to sate.

"I'm in you," he purred. "Ah, Christ, I'm in you." Then—*finally*— he began moving, an erotic little circular motion of his hips—not a thrusting but a slow deep rubbing inside her. Grinding himself into her, backing off just a bit, grinding again, each time nudging the tight bud of her clitoris with exquisite friction.

His intense, slow movements abraded some crazy spot inside her she'd not even known she had, and all her muscles clenched again on him, locking, shuddering, and when she came it was

like nothing she'd ever felt before, an explosion so deep inside her, so shatteringly intense, that a visceral cry was torn from her throat.

"Bloody hell," he roared his whole body going tight. He clamped his hands down on her hips, trying to back off, to pull out, not anywhere near ready to come yet, but it was too late, the way her body was closing around him was more than he could stand and he exploded inside her.

* * *

Hours later, Adam propped himself up on an elbow and stared down at Gabrielle, pondering what made beauty.

He thought he was beginning to understand. It wasn't symmetry of features; it wasn't perfection. It was uniqueness. That which one person had that no other possessed. That which was only their own. Perhaps Gabrielle's nose was like a thousand others, but they weren't on her face, with her eyes, with her cheekbones and hair. Nor were those noses graced with her many expressions, crinkling so charmingly when she laughed, flaring so haughtily when she was irritated.

He'd run the gamut of her expressions tonight. He'd seen her demanding, aggressive with lust, eyes glittering wildly as she'd arched and bucked beneath him. He'd seen her soft, sweetly yielding when he'd taken her from behind, on her hands and

knees in front of the full-length mirror in the boudoir. He'd held her head back by a fist in her long silky hair so he could watch her face in the mirror. Watch those slanted green-gold eyes narrow and gleam like a cat in heat as she purred with pleasure. Watch her full breasts swaying as his heavy testicles slapped rhythmically against her ass and thighs. Watch her watching him do it to her. He'd seen her dreamy and lost as he'd licked and lapped her to peak after shuddering peak. And he'd even seen her looking almost frightened as he'd wrung yet one more delicious shudder from her.

If he'd had his full Fae power he would have eased her virgin soreness; as it was, he'd had to stop because she couldn't take any more. So he'd gently cleansed her as she lay sated in bed, built up the fire, then gone down to the kitchen for food, realizing they'd missed dinner. In fact, dinner had been over for many, many hours.

He'd run into Dageus in the dim, shadowy kitchens, where the Highlander had been pilfering ice cream from the freezer. The younger Keltar twin had taken one look at him, laughed, and said, "I doona suspect we'll be seeing you for a few days, will we. Old One?"

"You'll see me by Lughnassadh," Adam had replied with a devilish grin. "And quit calling me Old One. I don't call you Young One. Adam. It's just Adam."

"Aye, 'tis Adam, then," Dageus had replied easily.

As Adam had padded barefoot back up the cool stone stairs in the castle, toting a tray laden with food, his human body sore in places he'd not known a man's body got sore, he'd suffered another of those sudden sharp pains in his chest and had nearly dropped the tray. He'd had to stop and lean against the

balustrade, gasping until it passed. He'd realized it was a good thing he would be getting out of his mortal body soon, because something was clearly wrong with the one Aoibheal had given him.

By the time he'd gotten back to the bedchamber, she'd been sound asleep, sprawled unselfconsciously across the bed, her nude body gleaming softly in the firelight. She was a vision of tangled blond hair, sex-flushed skin, and lush curves, a vibrant mortal, golden glow against silver satiny sheets.

Christ, she's amazing, Adam marveled, standing at the edge of the bed, staring down at his slumbering woman. Trailing the pad of a finger over the firm high peak of a breast. Even unconscious, her body reacted, the rosy nipple tightening. With a muffled oath he forced himself to drop his hand and back up a step, or he'd have his mouth on that nipple again, dragging the edge of his teeth across it the way he'd found she liked. And he'd hurt her, and he refused to hurt her.

She'd responded to him with all the pure, unstinting passion that he'd sensed lurking within her. All that fire she'd freed and turned on him, openly, without restraint, wanton to the core, and he'd reveled in it, soaked it up, gloried in it. She'd made him feel things he'd never felt before. Things he could spend immortal centuries pondering and perhaps still not fathom.

And for that gift you'll take her soul?

He flinched, shrugged it off. What— did human bodies come burdened with human consciences? *I'll give her immortality in exchange.*

You'll give her the choice? You'll tell her?

Not a chance in hell, he retorted silently.

If Gabrielle was to be his own private Eden, there would be no apple of knowledge proffered. Adam knew full well what had happened to that *other* Adam. A little knowledge always got a man booted out of the Garden.

He would not watch Gabrielle O'Callaghan die. He'd watched too many humans die. She was his now. She'd made her choice. She'd come to him, accepted him.

It would take a far better man than he to let her go where he could never follow.

* * *

Dageus smiled as he slipped through the darkened castle, one slightly melting pint of ice cream in his hand. He'd developed quite a taste for the modern-day treat, and a liking for teasing Chloe with the cool creaminess of it against skin scorching from his kisses. Licking it from her lips, her nipples, the svelte hollow of a hip.

They'd been making love for hours. Desire was in the air, the castle nigh smelled of romance. Tugging rode the night breeze and he was glad of it.

For if ever a man needed the healing touch of a woman, it was Adam.

Being possessed by the Draghar had changed Dageus in many ways, ways he was still trying to understand. He'd been systematically sorting through the vast amounts of knowledge they'd left inside his skull, extracting what could be used for good.

One of his most recently developed skills was that of deep-listening. He'd not yet told Drustan he could do it, was still learning to control it.

He'd never been able to manage it before, that meditative Druid regard his da had so excelled at, that listening that could peel away lies and see to the truth of a matter, to the heart of a man.

But in the past months of wedded bliss he'd discovered a new quietude, an inner peace that, coupled with the thirteen's knowledge, had opened his Druid senses.

He'd deep-listened to Adam Black today when they'd ridden out, needing to know if he was speaking truth about his reasons for bringing the walls down. If the Keltar were to be breaking oaths again, Dageus had to know it was for a just cause. He'd delved lightly and in that shallow penetration had learned that Adam spoke true.

But then he'd sensed something else, something he'd not expected to find in an all-powerful immortal, not even one temporarily diminished; something he'd recognized, and he'd not been able to resist opening his senses wide and probing more deeply.

What he'd heard in the ancient one's words— in what he'd said and in those spaces between what he'd said and not said— had stilled him to the core.

Once Dageus had thought himself a lonely man. Before he'd found his mate, before Chloe had pressed her wee hands to his heart and pledged herself to him with the binding vows.

But now he knew that what he'd thought of as loneliness he could compound by thousands of years and multiply by infinity and still not manage to quantify that darkness that lay so deceptively still within Adam Black.

Strange days, he mused, pushing open the door to his chamber, when the Tuatha Dé walked among them in human form.

Er... sort of.

For that was another unexpected thing he'd discovered about their otherworldly guest.

Adam was, as he'd said, no longer exactly Tuatha Dé.

Nor, however, was he human.

Gabby didn't leave Adam's bedchamber for three long, blissful days and nights. Three perfect, incredible days and nights. She abandoned herself to them, to him, completely.

Oh, they didn't make love the entire time, her body— so delicate in comparison to his— couldn't have withstood it.

But there were many ways to give and take pleasure, and he was a master of them all. They spent hours in the shower, lazily bathing each other, exploring each other's bodies, tasting and teasing. Hours that she feasted on gold-velvet skin, rippling muscles, and silky black hair spilling across her naked body. More hours where she was spread on a rug before the fire while he rubbed her down with scented oils, making playful comparison of her to a mare that had been ridden too hard.

Sliding up behind her, riding her again. Rubbing her down again. More bathing, more playing in bed.

The only time he left her was to get food. Days and nights of eating and sleeping and sex. No woman, she decided, had ever lost her virginity more fantastically. There were many long hours where she was precisely as he'd said she would be: too languorously sated even to move. Convinced he couldn't possibly arouse her again; yet aroused in a heartbeat from a mere gold-flecked dark glance from beneath dusky lashes and

slanted brows.

She felt as if she'd slipped into some netherworld of crystals and heather-scented fire and sizzling eroticism. Though she'd not noticed at first, too fixated on the vision of the great, dark, naked man, she'd finally realized that his chamber was called the Crystal Chamber because it housed crystal sculptures of various fanciful beasts. Unicorns and dragons, chimeras and phoenixes, gryphons and centaurs dotted the mantels, side tables, and chests. Dainty prisms hung in windows, more suspended above the hearth, catching the firelight and turning it to brilliant splashes of color.

Ornate silver-framed mirrors hung on the walls amid lovely tapestries, and dark, beautifully carved mahogany furniture graced the suite. Plush lambskin rugs were strewn about the floor. The bed was a masterwork of antique craftsmanship, topped with satiny sheets, plump down ticks, and a plush black velvet coverlet. It sported four posters the size of small trees (posters to which he'd tied her hands at one point, kissing and tasting her, driving her wild with need).

There couldn't have been a more fitting place for her to sleep with her Fae prince than this suite, surrounded by improbable creatures of legend, her improbable legend of a lover gilded by firelight, dappled with rainbow hues, rising above her, dark face taut with lust.

For those three days, she felt as if they existed in a place out of time, out of space, a fairy bower wherein nothing but the moment mattered, and the moments were so exquisite that, for a time, she forgot everything.

No questions spilled from lips too enchanted with kissing. No worries tumbled through a mind too intoxicated by lovemaking.

No thoughts of tomorrow intruded.

There was now, she was happy, and that was enough.

* * *

On the fourth day he roused her while it was still dark outside, bundled her nude body warmly in a down comforter, and sifted them repeatedly until at last he stopped atop a mountainous outcropping.

Perching with irreverent grace on the edge of a sheer thousand-foot drop, he cradled her in his arms and they watched the sun come up over the Highlands, their breath frosting the chilly air.

It began with the merest kiss of gold on the far misty horizon, slowly burned off the fog, turned to a rosy-orange fireball, then bathed the hills and valleys in gold.

And as they sat on top of the world while the day was being born he told her of his plan: the why of the rituals the MacKeltars performed on the feast days and what would happen if they didn't perform them; that they'd agreed to hold off on Lughnassadh, a few days hence, in order to bring Aoibheal to MacKeltar land; that when she came. Adam would apprise her of Darroc's treachery and secure Gabrielle's safety as he'd promised.

He said nothing about what might happen between them then.

No words of any future beyond that time.

And she didn't ask, because she was a big, fat coward. Falling for a fairy prince in human form was one thing.

But an immortal being? With all kinds of powers? Adam was overwhelming in human form. She couldn't imagine him in his natural state.

She wasn't sure she wanted to see him in it. She wanted things to go on like this forever. She didn't want any changes. Things were perfect as they were.

Adam with unlimited power could be terrifying.

Anyone with unlimited power could be terrifying. *She* could be terrifying with it.

So she refused to follow that line of thought any further. There was no point in speculation, it would only drive her crazy. So many things could happen, so many things could go wrong. She would deal with what came to be when it came to be. For all she knew, maybe Adam couldn't really protect her, and the queen would kill her or turn her over to the Hunters, and it would all become a moot point anyway.

There was a sobering thought.

And all the more reason to savor the now.

Which she did for the rest of the day, rolling across the bed with him, laughing and teasing and mating wildly.

Until dusk.

When the gloaming came, he bundled her up again, sifted them back to that high place, and they watched while the sky went

violet, then black, and the moon rose and the stars came peeping out.

"I've seen thousands of these Highland dusks and dawns," he told her. "And I never get my fill"

She tipped her head back, staring up at the black velvet sky pierced by glittering stars.

And she stalled thinking about thousands of dusks and dawns, about immortality and living forever, and before she could stop herself she blurted, "Why didn't Morganna take the elixir of life?"

His body stiffened instantly. He turned her roughly in his arms and stared into her eyes a long moment.

Then he kissed her and kissed her until she was breathless and no longer thinking about Morganna and immortality.

Though it would come back, that question, to gnaw at her.

* * *

"The two of you are cheating!" Dageus scowled at Chloe and Gabby.

"We are not," Chloe protested indignantly.

"You are too," Adam said. "I saw Gabby tilt her hand so you

could see it. It's the only reason you keep beating us."

Gabby arched a playful brow. "Sounds to me like somebody who's used to being immortal and all-powerful just can't handle losing at a mortal card game."

Adam shook his head, smiling faintly. She was irrepressible. And she *was* cheating. Had been for the past two hours, but he'd been letting it slide until Dageus had pointed it out. He'd found it rather amusing that the Highlander wasn't catching on, too distracted by the steamy looks Chloe kept shooting him, or the way his petite wife would wet her lips and smile to jar his concentration.

He hadn't needed any such looks from Gabby. Her mere existence jarred his concentration. He'd thought the past week might have burned off some of his edgy, relentless desire for her, but it had in no way diminished it. Perversely, the more he bedded her, it seemed, the more he needed to bed her again.

He would have kept her all to himself, until the very dawn of Lughnassadh, had Gwen and Chloe not come pounding on the Crystal Chamber door a few days ago, informing them enough was enough and they really should socialize with their hosts, at least during part of their days. Surely that wasn't too much to ask?

A blushing Gabrielle had insisted they venture forth. Had given him a quick lesson in human manners, a lesson he'd not liked one bit. He loathed the idea of sharing her with anyone, for any amount of time.

But Gabrielle had been resolute, and so the six of them had spent the past several days hiking the Highlands during the day, dining in the evening, and drinking and playing cards or chess

or some such human game into the wee hours. And Adam had done his damndest to wedge all his desire for her into the time it took the moon to bridge the sky. Christ, he'd begun to hate the dawn.

Not since his days with Morganna had he lived on such an intimate daily basis with humans, and never had mortals welcomed him so completely as these. (Apart from the maids—those he just couldn't figure out; he'd never seen a bunch of women more obsessed with his groin: For some bizarre reason a curvy redhead kept offering him bananas, and the other night at dinner, a blonde serving maid had stabbed a knife in a plump sausage before plunking it on his plate with a downright baleful glare.)

But the MacKeltars treated him as if he were one of them. Ribbed and jested with him as they did among themselves. Thrust their wee bairns into his arms and made him hold them. He'd not had a baby in his hands for over a thousand years, had never had one spit up on him. Regurgitated formula was hell on silk and leather, but then he'd caught the look in Gabrielle's eyes and decided tiny Maddy MacKeltar could spit up on him all she wanted.

They even got testy with him when they felt he wasn't being forthcoming enough about himself. In the past few days he'd talked of things, shared experiences he'd shared with none before. His own kind would have scoffed, and mortals had never truly seen him as one of them, never freed him so completely simply to be, without censure or preconception. Not even Morganna. He'd always been one of the Fae to her, and his son had never welcomed him at Castle Brodie, refusing to acknowledge him as his father.

But here, in this enchanted time, he was Adam. A man. Nothing more. Nothing less. And it was a completely fascinating thing to be.

He glanced about the library. Drustan and Gwen were playing progressive chess near the fire, laughing and talking.

Their tiny, beautiful dark-haired daughters were slumbering nearby, waking occasionally to be fed.

Gabby and Chloe were laughing, insisting to Dageus that they would never cheat, how could he think such a thing of them?

The great clock above the mantel chimed the hour eleven times.

In one hour Lughnassadh would begin. And the walls between realms would start to thin.

And he would sit here in the castle and wait for the queen.

By the close of day tomorrow, at the very latest, Aoibheal would be warned. Darroc would be revealed for the traitor he was, the realms would be safe, and Adam might very well be his immortal, all-powerful self again.

His petite *ka-lyrra*, however, would continue aging day by day.

And he would have to stop that.

He glanced at Gabrielle. She was nibbling her lower lip, shooting Chloe a mischievous look over her hand of cards. Around her there was— as there was around each human in the library— that infernal golden glow. That glow that ever made of him an unstable magnet, drawn in spite of himself, repelled despite his efforts to cozy near. That which lured him, that which he could never touch or understand.

He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. Tossed back a swallow of scotch, savoring the way it burned his human throat as it never had in his Tuatha Dé form.

For the first time in his existence he wished for an ability no Tuatha Dé possessed. Though they'd learned to move backward to certain degrees in it, and forward again to their present (though never beyond that; legend held there was only one race that could navigate what was *yet* to be, but Adam gave little credence to such legends), not even the queen herself could stop time.

* * *

"Halt!" hissed Bastion.

The Hunters stopped instantly. "But we've got his scent. He's in these hills, very near here," one protested.

Bastion grimaced. "There are wards. The queen protects this land. We dare not cross them."

"But Adam Black and his human crossed them," the Hunter said impatiently.

"Should we summon Darroc?" another asked.

Bastion shook his head. "No. There's nothing Darroc can do so long as Adam hides behind wards. We wait. We watch for the

first opportunity. Then we summon Darroc. We'll not lose our chance again. The Elder won't move against the queen until this enemy of his is gone."

And more than anything, Bastion wanted Darroc to move against the queen, to topple her from her throne. This brief time of roaming the human realm again had awakened all his senses, sloughed away the boredom and ennui of his Unseelie hell. Reminded him of how alive he felt, how good it was to be a Hunter. How many delicious humans there were to prey upon.

He'd not blow this chance. Nor would he give the Elder a chance to screw things up again with his lust for vengeance. He'd summon Darroc only at the last possible minute, and if Darroc didn't kill him fast enough for his liking, Bastion himself would see to Adam's death.

21

Aoibheal paced a tract of silica sand on the Isle of Morar, staring out at a frothing turquoise sea, her iridescent eyes flashing.

Time, usually of no relevance to her, a thing of which she was, indeed, scarcely aware, had suddenly become a pressing concern.

A short amount of it ago, she'd sensed an unfamiliar sensation, a growing lack of cohesion in the fabric of the realms she'd created for her race. Because she'd not felt such a thing before, she'd not immediately comprehended what it was.

The walls between the realms of Tuatha Dé and Man were thinning.

It took her yet another amount of time to pinpoint the origin of distress in the weft and weave of worlds: The Keltar Druids had not yet performed the ritual of Lughnassadh, the ancient rite that was to be completed at break of the feast day, as it had been for millennia.

She shook her head, astonished. By Danu, would they test her mercy again?

She narrowed her eyes, looking not outward but inward, stretching her far-vision across time and place. Seeking which

Keltar was failing her now.

Stunned to find it was the same ones. Again. Stretching farther to know the why of it...

She snapped ramrod straight, eyes wide with disbelief.

"*Amadan*," she hissed. "*How dare you?*"

Perhaps even more to the point, how *could he?*

She'd stripped him of everything, rendered him powerless— or at least she thought she had— unable to be seen, heard, felt. She'd consigned him to a vile existence, insubstantial as a ghost, and cast him into the human realm. Banished him, cut him off, denied him even the merest glimpse of his own kind.

She'd chosen the parameters of his punishment carefully, to force him to taste the bitterness of the human condition with none of the attendant sweetness, to cure him of his foolish fascination with mortals once and for all.

Her repeated indulgence of her favored prince— the only one of her people who ever managed to surprise her, and surprise was nectar of the gods to a sixty-thousand-year-old queen— had cast her in an unfavorable light with both her courtiers and her advisers. Not to mention the eternal cleaning up after him she was obliged to do.

The High Council had been insisting she take action for centuries and, after his most recent defiance, she'd had no choice but to agree. Adam had argued against her in front of her court and council, a thing she could never permit, lest her sovereignty be questioned, lest she be blatantly challenged. Though she was the most powerful of the Seelie, that power was hers only so long as she held the support of the majority of her

people. That power could be taken from her.

She'd been certain fifty or so years of such punishment would be enough to make him grateful to be Tuatha Dé, to bring him to heel, to stop him from meddling with humans.

She'd not believed it possible for him to find a way to meddle in the form she'd given him.

Oh, how wrong she'd been. As always, if a loophole existed, her iconoclastic *D'Jai* prince found it. And in a mere few months' time. There he was, on the Keltar estate, and there was no doubt in her mind that he'd created this problem. Even cursed and powerless, he'd somehow found a way to do something to keep the Keltar from performing the ritual.

She stretched her senses again, feeling for dimensional faults. The ramifications of the thinning walls would first be felt in Scotland, then would spread quickly to Ireland and England. It had, in fact, already begun. The effects would radiate outward until, by nightfall, hidden Tuatha Dé realms would rise up all over the world in the midst of human ones.

By nightfall, any Tuatha Dé walking among humans in anything less than full human glamour would be exposed.

By nightfall, even the silica sands of Morar would gleam palely beneath a human moon.

Dimensions would bleed into one another, temporal portals would open. The Unseelie would be freed.

In a nutshell, all hell would break loose.

* * *

Adam was sitting with Gabrielle in the great hall, in the waning afternoon light, when he sensed the queen drawing near. *About bloody time*, he thought. Even he'd begun to get a little edgy waiting, wondering what was taking her so long.

He had no words for how he sensed her, was, in fact, rather surprised he could, being human and all, but there was a tensing in his body, a pressure inside his skull. He tightened his arms protectively around Gabrielle.

Hours ago, he'd insisted the MacKeltars leave the hall, get out of the castle— over their strident protests— persuading them it was wiser they be elsewhere, as Aoibheal would be furious when she arrived.

He'd kept Gabrielle with him. He would protect her against the queen's wrath, however need be, but he didn't want the distraction of vulnerable MacKeltars too.

A fierce gust of wind kicked up suddenly, extinguishing the fire in the hearth, then the air was drenched with jasmine and sandalwood, and Aoibheal was there, shimmering before them.

"Oh, God," he heard Gabrielle whisper, awed.

"My Queen," Adam said, rising instantly, bringing Gabrielle up with him, an arm around her waist.

Ah, yes, Aoibheal was furious. She was in high glamour, so terrifyingly beautiful that, even for him, she was almost impossible to look at, shimmering brilliantly, lit by the radiance

of a thousand tiny suns. Though her form was essentially human, her body chillingly perfect, nude beneath her gown of light, there was nothing human about her. Pure power pulsed in the air, the presence of an immense, ancient entity.

"How dare you?" Her words reverberated through the great hall, steel striking off stone.

"My Queen," Adam said swiftly, "I would not have taken such extreme measures were your welfare not at risk. Gravely at risk."

"I'm to believe this is about me, Amadan? You would have me interpret your latest— and I must say by far greatest— act of defiance as a selfless act?" Mockery dripped from her voice.

She was using part of his true name, not Adam, but Amadan. Ah, yes, she was pissed. "It is about you," he said. A pause. "Though if you were inclined to reward me, I would not be averse."

"Reward you? What would I be rewarding you for? Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you know that already humans have begun slipping through the fabric of place and time where the old magic lies fallow?"

"The dolmens have opened?" Adam was startled.

"Yes."

"Well, why the bloody hell did you wait so long?"

She gave him such an arctic glare that he was surprised his skin didn't ice. "How am I at risk? Speak. Now. Fast. With each passing moment. I grow more inclined to punish you further than hear you out."

"Darroc has made an attempt on my life." *There. Face that, Aoibheal*, he thought, *and restore me to immortality as you should have months ago.*

The queen stiffened. "Darroc? How do you know that? You can no longer see our kind."

"I saw him," Gabrielle spoke then.

Adam glanced down at her, tightening his arm around her. Her eyes were narrowed, her face was averted, yet she was actually managing to peek at the queen from the periphery of her vision. The queen had chosen high glamour deliberately, knowing humans couldn't focus on it. But she didn't know Gabrielle, he thought with a flash of pride; she was strong, his *ka-lyrra*.

Aoibheal didn't deign to acknowledge her. "How?" she demanded of Adam.

"She's a *Sidhe-seer*, my Queen."

Aoibheal's eyes narrowed. "Indeed." She cast a raking, imperious glance over Gabrielle. "I believed them all dead. You do know that by the terms of The Compact that makes her mine."

Adam stiffened. "She helped me gain an audience with you so I could warn you that Darroc is plotting against you." he said tightly. "In exchange for acting as my intermediary, I assured her safety."

"You assured? You had no right to assure anything."

"My Queen, Darroc has brought forth Hunters from the Unseelie kingdom. There are a score or more in his service."

"Hunters? *My* Hunters? You jest!" The breeze swirling through

the great hall gusted, bitterly frigid, licking around him.

Adam's breath frosted the air with tiny ice crystals when he said, "It's no jest. It's true. The second time he attacked, he didn't bother to conceal himself or his Hunters. I saw them myself."

"Tell me," she commanded.

Speaking briskly, he told her all, from finding Gabrielle, to approaching Aine and her companion, to Darroc's first attack and subsequent one.

"You saw all this, too, *Sidhe-seer*?" the queen demanded.

Gabrielle nodded.

"Tell me exactly what you saw."

Watching the queen with that half-averted gaze, Gabrielle told her what she'd seen in detail, describing the Fae involved.

"And we both know," Adam concluded when Gabrielle fell silent, "there's only one thing Darroc could have promised the Hunters to sway their fealty from you."

Aoibheal spun in a swirl of blinding light. She was silent for a time.

Beside him. Gabrielle was tense, breathing shallowly. He could feel the unease in her small body and realized that she was seeing the kind of Fae she'd been raised on tales of. The queen was truly formidable— there was no other word for it. Awe-inspiring, ancient, forbidding, alien, incredibly powerful. He only hoped his *ka-lyrra* would remember that he was not like his queen. That Tuatha Dé were no more like unto one another than humans were.

Finally the queen turned back to him. "Darroc is a High Council Elder. One of my strongest supporters, staunchest advocates."

"For Christ's sake, lip service, no more! Will you *never* see through that?"

"*He* has never left my realm to play with humans."

Adam bit back a caustic. *No, just Hunters*, and remained silent.

"He has served on my council for thousands of years."

Again he said nothing. He'd told her what he had to say; he knew she understood the ramifications of it. He knew also it would be difficult for her to accept that one of her Elders had betrayed her.

"I have forbidden any Seelie to bring forth the Unseelie for any reason, under threat of a soulless death."

"Gee," he couldn't resist saying dryly, "you think maybe Darroc forgot?"

"Don't think *I've* forgotten the bad blood between the two of you!" she hissed.

"I'm not the one walking with Hunters!" he hissed back.

Another silence. Her fury at him was easing, turning toward another as she digested his news. The air was slowly beginning to warm again.

"And for this you had the Keltar fail to perform the ritual of Lughnassadh that keeps the walls between realms intact? You took it upon yourself to risk our worlds colliding?"

"It was the only way I knew to gain your ear. To warn you. No

matter that my queen had chosen to punish me. I could not permit an enemy to attack her without doing all in my power to protect her. I will always protect my queen. Even," he added pointedly, "when she has stripped away my power to do so. Besides, it's not as if I didn't try to find Circenn first. It occurs to me now that perhaps you were the reason I couldn't find him"

"Perhaps I was," she agreed. "Perhaps he and his family have been enjoying an extended holiday on Morar."

Adam shook his head, lips curving in a faint sardonic smile. "I should have known."

She stared at him a long moment. "I must have proof of this. I must see this with my own eyes. I must carry firsthand vision back to the council."

Adam shrugged. "Use me as bait."

"And you seek what in return?"

"The honor of serving you," he said smoothly. "Though, there is also the small matter of the return of my immortality and full powers."

"There is something you owe me. I'm waiting."

A muscle leapt in Adam's jaw. "I said it in the catacombs, mere moments after you cursed me."

"I would hear it again. Here. Now."

Adam's nostrils flared. With an imperious incline of his head, he said. "I see now that countering you before the court might have been ill-advised, my Queen. I acknowledge that a show of my fealty might have better served you. It is possible I might have endeavored to find a more appropriate venue to air my

concerns."

"And counted yourself fortunate I bothered to hear you at all."

Adam said nothing.

"Don't think I missed all the 'might haves' in that 'apology.' You still have not admitted you were wrong."

"I believed at the time that there were those among your council who had personal motives for advocating trial-by-blood. I was concerned then that they plotted against you. It would seem I was right"

Aoibheal smiled faintly. "Ah, Amadan, you never change, do you?" She eyed him measuringly. "You will leave protected land. You will make your way back to where he first found you."

"Yes, my Queen."

"The two of you will leave in the morning, then."

"You mean, I will," he corrected.

"Don't tell me what I mean. I said what I meant. You and the *Sidhe-seer*."

"I said *I* would draw him out. Gabrielle isn't— "

"Gabrielle? Lovely name. You sound fond of your human. You wouldn't be about to argue with me, would you? You wouldn't be about to try my patience further, when I've yet to tidy up after your most recent mess?"

Adam stopped mid-word; when he spoke again his voice was carefully dispassionate.

"When the *Sidhe-seer*," he rephrased, "agreed to act as my

intermediary and help me find a way to contact you, I promised her safety in exchange. She has risked herself to aid us, we who hunted her people for so long. Her assistance has helped preserve your reign and the safety of all the realms. It has long been our custom to bestow gifts upon mortals who aid us. I promised her we would leave her in her own world when all was done, alive and well, free of any Tuatha Dé persecution, assuring her safety and that of those she loves."

"Grand promises from such a powerless Fae."

"Would you make of me a liar?"

"You do that often enough yourself."

Adam bristled. There'd been no need to say that in front of Gabrielle.

Silence stretched. Then the queen exhaled softly, a silvery sound. "Reveal this traitor for me and I will uphold your promise to the human, but I warn you, make no more. *Amadan.*"

"Then you agree she should remain here. On Keltar land."

"I said that I will uphold your promise. But she goes with you. Darroc might wonder at her absence and not show his hand. If he has betrayed me, I want proof and I want it now. Before he acts against me and makes those in my court think it possible." The queen moved in a swirl of radiant light. "I will be watching. Lure him out for me and I will come. Show me Hunters at my Elder's side and I will restore you to your full power. And let you decide his fate. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Adam jerked his head once in a tight nod.

A rush of sound spilled from her lips in Tuatha Dé tongue. Beside him. Gabrielle shivered intensely.

"You will wear the *féth fiada* until this is done, Amadan."

"Bloody hell," Adam muttered savagely. "I *hate* being invisible."

"And, Keltar," Aoibheal said in a voice like sudden thunder, with a glance up at the balustrade. "Henceforth I would advise against tampering with my curses. Perform the Lughnassadh ritual now or face my wrath."

"Aye, Queen Aoibheal," Dageus and Drustan replied together, stepping out from behind stone columns bracketing the stairs.

Adam smiled faintly. He should have known no Highlander would flee, only retreat to a higher vantage— take to the hills, in a manner of speaking— waiting in silent readiness should battle be necessary.

Gabby went limp beside him with a soft *whoosh* of breath.

The queen was gone.

Early the next morning, Gabby and Adam packed to leave Castle Keltar and catch a flight back to the States.

As Adam was invisible again, they would be traveling cloaked, and Gabby was surprised to realize she was rather looking forward to it. There was a certain intriguing impunity one felt, concealed by the *féth fiada*. There was also the fact that it meant they'd be touching constantly, and she simply couldn't get enough of touching him.

Immediately upon the queen's departure yesterday, Dageus and Drustan had performed the ritual of Lughnassadh. Once the walls were again secured, they'd sat down and rehashed the afternoon's events, with Gabby serving as Adam's intermediary.

She'd been surprised by how wired with excitement Chloe and Gwen had been to see— sort of, out of the comers of their eyes as well— the queen of the Tuatha Dé. It seemed Chloe had felt quite cheated that Dageus had encountered her once before and had failed to take a complete accounting of her.

Their reaction— one not of fear but of interest and curiosity— had served to solidify her new slant on things. Yes, the Tuatha Dé Danaan (as Gabby was now calling them) were otherworldly, different, but not the heartless, emotionless creatures she'd been raised to believe they were.

As Gwen had said, they were another race, a highly advanced race. And though the inexplicable could be frightening, learning about it went a long way toward allaying one's fears.

Further toward that end, the MacKeltars had taken her, with the once-more-invisible Adam in tow, to the *other* Keltar castle last night, where Christopher and Maggie MacKeltar lived, and shown her the underground chamber library that housed all the ancient Druid lore, dating all the way back to when The Compact had first been negotiated.

Gabby had gotten to see the actual treaty between the races, etched on a sheet of pure gold, scribed in a language no scholar alive could identify. Adam had translated passages of it, emphasizing the part about *Sidhe-seers*: that "those who see the Fae belong to the Fae," yet they were not to be killed or enslaved but permitted to live in peace and comfort in any Fae realm they chose, their every desire met, except, of course, for their freedom. *I told you we didn't harm them*, he'd said.

On the way back to Dageus and Drustan's castle, while Chloe and Gwen had been talking about the queen again, Adam had insisted Gabby convey his irritation with them for leaving by the front door and circling straight around to the rear entrance of the castle to sneak back in.

I told you we expected you to have our backs if the need arose, Drustan had reminded him through her. *I also told you that we would be having yours*.

And when Gabby'd passed on those words, she'd glimpsed a flicker of emotion in Adam's dark gaze that had made the breath catch softly in her throat.

How could she have ever thought that Adam Black felt no

emotion? Even the queen had displayed emotion. *That* was a fallacy in the O'Callaghan *Books* she'd be swiftly amending. Along with about a zillion others.

Still, she could understand how her ancestors had gotten it so wrong. If she'd had to go on the mere appearance of Queen Aoibheal, or of the Hunters, or even of Adam, without ever having interacted with them, without having come to understand so much about their world, she'd have thought the same things.

But she knew so much better now.

She'd spent another scorching, delicious, decadent night in Adam's arms.

He was the kind of lover she'd never imagined existed, not even in her most heated fantasies. And she'd had some pretty darned heated ones.

He was inexhaustible, alternately tender and wild, playful, then staring into her eyes with deadly intensity. He made a woman feel as if nothing existed but her, as if the entire world had melted away and there was nothing more pressing than her next soft gasp, her next smile, their next kiss.

He'd still spoken no words of either feelings or future. Nor had she.

Though the queen herself had guaranteed Gabby's safety when this was through, she was having a hard time seeing past their date with Darroc. She knew she'd not be able to truly draw a deep breath until it was over.

Then she would face her future.

Then she would try to decide— assuming she had any decision to make, that he didn't simply abandon her once he was all-powerful again— how in the world a mortal and an immortal could have any kind of life together.

* * *

"Promise you'll come back. I mean it, and *soon*," Gwen demanded, hugging her tightly. "And you have to call us and let us know the *minute* Darroc shows up and this is over. We're going to be worrying. Promise?"

Gabby nodded. "I promise."

"And bring Adam back too," Gwen said.

Gabby glanced at her tall, dark prince. The day had dawned swathed in a thick white fog, and though it was already ten in the morning, none of it had burned off. And how could it? If there was a sun anywhere in the sky, she certainly couldn't see it. Above her, the world had a solid white ceiling. Beyond Adam, who stood a dozen feet away, near the rental car they'd arrived in, was a white wall.

Adam. Her gaze lingered lovingly on him. He was wearing black leather pants, a cream Irish fisherman's sweater, and those sexy Gucci boots with silver chains and buckles. His long, silky, black hair spilled to his waist, and his chiseled face was unshaven, dusted with a shadow-beard. Regal gold glinted at his throat.

He was heart-stoppingly beautiful.

She glanced back at Gwen and was horrified to feel a sharp sting of tears pressing at her eyes. "If he's still in my life, I will," she said softly.

Gwen snorted and she and Chloe exchanged glances. "Oh, we think he'll still be in your life, Gabby."

Her meticulously erected defenses on that very topic trembled at the foundation. She stiffened mentally, knowing that if she wasn't very, very careful, she could turn into an emotional basket case. If she let herself feel even the tiniest of the many fears she was suppressing, they would all break free. And there was no telling what she might do or say: The Banana Incident, case in point. Emotion did unpredictable things to her tongue. Bad, bad things.

Despite her resolve to keep her fears at bay, she heard herself say plaintively, "But how? For heaven's sake, he's going to be immor—"

"Don't," Chloe cut her off sternly. "I'm going to share something with you," she said with a glance at Gwen, "that a wise woman once told me. Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith. Just do it. Don't look down."

"Great," Gabby muttered. "That's just great. It sure seems like *I'm* the one having to do all the leaping."

"Somehow," Gwen said slowly, "I think before all is said and done, Gabby, you won't be the only one doing it."

* * *

"Turn left," Adam instructed.

"Left? How can you even *see* a left in this pea soup?" Gabby said irritably. She could barely make out the road ten feet past the hood of the compact car. But it wasn't just the fog that was aggravating her; the farther they got from Castle Keltar, the more vulnerable she was feeling. As if the most magnificent chapter in the Book of Gabrielle O'Callaghan's Life was coming to a close and she wasn't going to like what she found when she turned the page.

She understood now why her friend Elizabeth, with her near-genius, analytical mind gave wide berth to murder mysteries, psychological thrillers, and horror stories, and read only romance novels. Because, by God, when a woman picked up one of those steamy books, she had a firm guarantee that there would be a Happily-Ever-After. That though the world outside those covers could bring such sorrow and disappointment and loneliness, between those covers, the world was a splendid place to be.

She glanced irritably at Adam. He was looking at her. Hard.

"*What?*" she snapped belligerently, not meaning to sound belligerent but feeling it to the core.

He said softly, "You aren't falling for me, are you, Irish?"

Returning her gaze fixedly to the road ahead. Gabby clenched her jaw, incapable of speaking for several moments, her

stomach a stew of emotions, a veritable pressure cooker about to blow. She muttered a few choice words Grain would have shuddered to hear.

"*Why* do you keep asking me that?" she snapped at last. "I'm really *sick* of you asking me that. Do I ask you that? Have I ever asked you that? That is *such* a patronizing thing to say, like you're warning me or something, like you're saying. 'Don't fall for me, Irish, you helpless, weak little woman,' and what's with this frigging 'Irish' bit? Can't you call me by name? Is that one of those depersonalizing touches? Like it removes you a bit from the immediacy of the moment, somehow makes me less of a human being with feelings? I'll have you know, you arrogant, overbearing. thickheaded, underdisclosing, never-ask-me-any-questions-because-I-sure-as-hell-won't-answer-them-to-you-O-mere-mortal prince, that I took my fair share of psychology courses in college, and I understand a thing or two about men that applies to ones who aren't even of the human persuasion, and *if* were falling for you, which I'm here to tell you I'm not, because falling implies an ongoing action, an event that's taking place in real time, here and now—"

She broke off abruptly, on the verge of revealing too much. Too wounded, too uncertain of herself, of him, to go on.

Inhaled. Puffed her bangs from her face with an angry breath.

Long moments unfurled and he said nothing.

Gutting the words slowly, she said, "Why didn't Morganna take the elixir of immortality? I *need you* to answer this."

The silence stretched. She refused to look at him.

"Because immortality," he said finally, slowly, as if each word

were being forcibly pried from his mouth and was paining him more deeply than she could possibly know, "and the immortal soul are incompatible. You can't have both."

Gabby jerked and looked at him, horrified.

He slammed his fist into the glove box. Plastic exploded as his hand went right through it. Half the little door dangled for a moment on one hinge, then fell to the floor. His lips curved in a bitter smile. "Not what you expected to hear, eh?"

"You mean, if Morganna had taken it, she would have lost her immortal soul?" Gabby gasped.

"And Darroc thinks humans aren't very bright." Dark sarcasm dripped from his voice.

"So, er... but... I don't get it. How? Does a person, like, have to hand it over or something?"

"Humans have an aura surrounding them that my kind can see," he said flatly. "The immortal soul lights than from within, makes than glow golden. Once a human takes the elixir of life, that soul begins to bum out, until there is nothing of it left."

Gabby blinked. "I glow golden? You mean, right now, as I'm sitting here?"

He gave a bitter little laugh. "More intensely than most."

"Oh." A pause while she tried to collect her thoughts. "So, do they change, the humans who take it?"

"Ah, yes. They change."

"I see." The utter lack of inflection in his reply made her deeply uneasy. She suddenly had no desire to know *how* they changed.

Suspected she wouldn't like it at all. "So then, that means our *Books* were right about the Tuatha Dé not having souls, doesn't it?"

"Your *Books* were right about many things," he said coldly. "You know that. You knew it when you took me as your lover. You took me anyway."

"You really don't have a soul?" Of all he'd just told her, she found that the most unfathomable. How could it be? She couldn't get her brain around it, not now that she knew him. Things that didn't have souls were... well, evil, weren't they? Adam wasn't evil. He was a good man. Better than most, if not all, she'd ever met.

"Nope. No soul, Gabrielle. That's me, Adam Black, iridescent-eyed, soulless, deadly fairy."

Ouch, she'd said that to him once. Seemed a lifetime ago.

She stated into the fog for a time, driving on autopilot.

And she tried not to ask it, but she'd just begun to believe that maybe the Tuatha Dé weren't quite so different from humans, only to find out that they were, and she couldn't stop herself. She had to know *how* different. Precisely what she was dealing with. "Hearts? Do the Tuatha Dé have hearts?"

"No physiological equivalent." Bored-now voice.

"Oh." Upon discovering how erroneous so much of the O'Callaghan lore was, she'd pretty much ejected the bulk of it from her mind, tossed it out with her many preconceptions. But pails of it had been right after all. Big parts.

More driving. More silence.

You're not falling for me, are you, Irish? he'd said.

And she'd had a minor meltdown because that was precisely the problem. She wasn't falling. She'd *fallen*. As in, past tense. Way past tense. She was hopelessly in love with him. She'd been building a dream future for them inside her head, embellishing it with the tiniest and most tender of details.

Gwen and Chloe had been absolutely right, and Gabby'd known it herself, even then. Just hadn't wanted to admit it. Just as she hadn't wanted to admit that the reason she'd wanted so desperately to know why Morganna had refused the elixir was because Gabby had been secretly hoping that he would fall in love with her, too, she could become immortal, and they could love each other forever. They could have an eternal Happily-Ever-After.

But she wasn't stupid. Ever since he'd told her about Morganna refusing the chance to live forever, she'd known there had to be a catch. Just hadn't known what a whopper of a catch it was.

Immortality and the immortal soul are incompatible.

Though she'd never considered herself a particularly religious person, she was deeply spiritual, and the soul was, well... the sacred essence of a person, the imprint of self, the source of one's capacity for goodness, for love. It was what was reborn again and again on one's journey to evolve. A soul was the inner divine, the very breath of God.

And his elixir of life reeked of Faustian overtones: *Here, take this and you can live forever, for the small price of your immortal soul*. She could almost smell the acrid brimstone of hellfire. Hear the rustle of unholy contracts scribed on thick, yellowed parchments, signed in blood. Feel the breeze from the

leathery flapping of winged Hunters coming to collect.

She shivered. She didn't count herself a superstitious person, yet it got to her on a visceral level. Made her blood run cold.

A soft bitter laugh cut into her thoughts. "Not interested in living forever, Gabrielle? Not liking the terms?"

Oh, that tone was like nothing she'd ever heard him use. Wicked, cynical, twisted. A voice truly befitting the blackest Fae.

She glanced at him.

And sucked in a sharp breath.

He looked utterly devilish, his black eyes bottomless, ancient, cold. Nostrils flared, lips curled in something only a fool might call a smile. He was, at that moment, every inch an inhuman Fae prince, otherworldly, dangerous. This, she realized, was the face of the *Sin Siriche Du*: the face her ancestors had glimpsed on long-ago battlefields, as he'd watched the brutal slaughter, smiling.

"Didn't think so." Silky sarcasm dripped from that deep, strangely accented voice.

A dozen thoughts collided in her mind and she floundered mentally, trying to figure out where to step next in this conversation that had started out so innocuously, only to become such a quagmire.

He looked so remote, so detached, as if nothing could touch him, as if nothing she could say would matter anyway. And a little doubt niggled at her: Was this, then, how he was when he was fully Tuatha Dé?

She couldn't believe that. She *wouldn't* believe that. She *knew*

him. He was a good man.

Leap, Gabby, an inner voice whispered. Tell him how you feel. Throw it all on the line.

She swallowed. Hard. Were Gwen and Chloe here, she knew they would echo that counsel. They'd taken such leaps, and look where it had gotten them. Who was to say it wouldn't work for her?

There was only one way to find out. Nothing risked, nothing gained.

She drew a deep, fortifying breath. *I love you.* she whispered the words in her mind. She hadn't had a lot of practice with those words, had only ever said them to Gram, and long ago to parents, both of whom had gone away.

She wet her lips. "Adam, I— "

"Bloody hell, spare me whatever sniveling excuses you're about to offer." he snarled. "I didn't frigging ask you to take the elixir, did I, *Irish?*"

Tears filled her eyes and her teeth clacked shut. Oh, she hadn't needed that reminder! She was all too aware of that fact. And that he'd never said so much as one word about any kind of future together. Nor a single word that seemed to hint at any degree of commitment or emotion. Oh, there'd been sweet words in bed, even out of it, but none of those things to which a woman was so attuned, those seemingly casually spoken phrases that hinted at a tomorrow and a dozen tomorrows after that. No mentions of an upcoming holiday, or a place or thing he'd like her to see. No subtle words that were really subtle pledges, testing the water, seeking like response.

Not one.

Her declaration clotted in her throat. And suddenly she couldn't breathe, couldn't sit in the car with him one moment more.

She slammed on the brakes, jammed the car into park, and hopped out onto the road, walking blindly, scooping angrily at fog. The external environs too accurately mirrored her internal landscape: Nothing was clear, she couldn't see ten steps ahead of her, couldn't get a fix on where she'd just been.

Behind her, she heard his car door slam.

"Stop, Gabrielle! Come back here," he commanded roughly.

"Just give me a few minutes *alone*, okay?"

"Gabrielle, we're not on Keltar land," he thundered. "Come back here."

"Oh!" She stopped and turned abruptly. She hadn't realized that. When had they left Keltar land?

"No," a cool voice said as Darroc stepped out of the fog between them, "you're not, are you?"

Then Darroc was turning toward Adam, and she heard a sudden, sharp, short burst of automatic gunfire.

And Adam was flinching, jerking, great splashes of red spreading across that cream fisherman's sweater, his dark head flying back, arms outflung. Falling back, going down.

And Hunters were closing in all around her.

She felt their talons on her skin, felt a broken sob clawing its way up her throat.

And then she fainted and felt no more.

Ah, ka-lyrra, I look at you and you make me want to live a man's life with you. To wake with you and sleep with you, argue with you and make love with you, to get a silly human job and take walks in the park and live so tiny beneath such a vast sky.

But I will never stay with another human woman and watch her die. Never.

— FROM THE (GREATLY REVISED) BLACK EDITION OF
THE O'CALLAGHAN *Book of the Sin Siriche Du*

Gabby raised the plastic shade over the plane window and stated out into the dark night sky.

Alone, hence visible, she'd had no choice but to book a flight, putting it on her credit card. The only flight available had been the red-eye, and she had three lengthy layovers to look forward to, in Edinburgh, London, and Chicago.

When she'd regained consciousness, she'd been lying in the road.

Alone. With a sick, horrid feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Watching the man she loved being brutally shot had been the purest hell.

She'd heard the bullets ripping into his body with dull, wet sounds, she'd seen his blood spurting, and— if it had indeed been only an illusion courtesy of the queen, as she prayed it had been— the look of pain and shock on Adam's face had been stunningly, horrifyingly real.

She'd forced herself up on shaky legs, trembling, desperately looking around for someone to tell her that it hadn't really happened. That the queen hadn't really let him die.

But there'd been no one there to reassure her. Only thick, swirling fog and aching silence.

Apparently. Faery was done with her.

There wasn't even any blood anywhere; no sign that anyone had ever been on that road but her.

So what, she'd raged, shaking her fist at the dense bank of clouds above her. I don't even get to know what happened? That's bullshit. If you think I'm just walking away without explanations, you are so wrong! Where is Adam? What happened? Show him to me! Tell me he's okay!

But walk away, or rather drag her miserable self away, was exactly what she'd finally ended up doing.

She'd been out of her head for a time. She'd raged and shouted until her throat was raw, until she was capable of making only broken croaking sounds. She'd stalked and paced and stomped until her legs had given out, until she'd slumped against the car, then slid to the ground in exhaustion.

She'd huddled, shivering in the chilly fog while the day turned to night around her, waiting.

Absolutely certain that at any moment Adam would "pop" in, flash her that lazy-sexy smile, tell her he was okay, then finish the stupid, awful conversation they'd been having.

She would tell him that she loved him. And somehow everything would be all right. So, he didn't have a soul or a heart. So, he was physiologically different from her, sprung of an alien race. So, she could never become immortal.

So what

She would take what Morganna had taken: a life with him. Whatever she could have of him. They could make things work,

she knew they could. It might not be her idealistic teenage fantasy, but it would be enough. It would be far better than having nothing of him.

Fourteen hours later it had dimly penetrated that she couldn't sit in the middle of the road forever. That she was stiff and cold and hungry and needed desperately to go to the bathroom.

That she was slowly going crazy sitting in the dark by herself, torturing herself with imaginings.

Surely the queen hadn't let him die. Surely Aoibheal wasn't so callous, would never sacrifice one of her own. Surely she'd swept him away and healed him. Surely she'd kept her word and restored him.

But those "surelys" weren't entirely comforting, because *if* he was okay and restored, then where was he?

If he was okay, how could he just leave her sitting in the middle of the road, with no answers, no matter how messy of an argument they'd gotten into?

Unless, unless, unless...

Oh, the "unlesses" just sucked!

Unless he hadn't really cared about her at all.

Unless it had all just been a brief diversion for him.

Unless she'd never been anything more than a means to an end.

No. She refused to believe that. Just as she refused to believe he was dead.

"He's okay," she whispered to herself. "And he's going to come

back. Any minute now."

* * *

Any minute became any day became any week.

Gabby moved woodenly through time. Detachedly going thorough the motions, void of passion, an automaton.

Though, upon returning home, a part of her had wanted nothing more than to barricade herself in her house and hide, to curl in bed with the covers snug over her head, there was a bigger part of her that harbored a special and very personal hatred of quitters, of people who just gave up and left.

It was something she could never permit herself to do.

So the very next morning after returning to the States, she'd gone in to work at Little & Staller, acting as if she'd never even been gone.

And just as she'd figured, no one had bothered to clean out her desk. Cases were still stacked every bit as high and haphazardly as ever they'd been. Cleaning it out would have taken time, and all the interns at Little & Staller were overworked. Besides, anyone foolish enough to clean off another person's desk inevitably got stuck with their caseload.

No, her desk would have sat untouched until one plaintiff or

another had called, demanding to know why their case hadn't been heard yet. Until some fire had needed putting out.

Without saying a word to anyone, she'd walked in, plunked her double-shot espresso on the desk, sat down, and begun working on arbitrations. Woodenly. With brisk efficiency. Refusing to think about anything but the case at hand. Losing herself in her work. In the innocent people who needed her to help them, needed her expertise.

And when Jeff Staller had stalked over, red-faced and blustering, furiously demanding to know where the hell she'd been— and was she some kind of idiot to think she still had a job after disappearing like that?— she'd merely glanced coolly up at him and said, *Have you taken a good look at my win ratio? You want to fire me? Fine. Fire me. Say the word.*

It had been nearly a month since their little confrontation and he'd still not said "the word."

And she knew he never would.

Funny, she was dead inside, yet Jay had commented just the other day on how "together" she seemed. How great she looked, and he didn't know where her new confidence had come from, but, *It's kick-ass, Gabby. You re really rocking.*

She'd smiled faintly, bitterly amused by the irony of it: how not giving a shit about anything came off looking like confidence. It occurred to her that perhaps she should try interviewing with TT&T again.

But she didn't, because change was more than she was capable of dealing with at the moment.

Besides, at Little & Staller, she'd developed a routine that kept

her nicely numb.

And if, on occasion, a sneaky little memory of a stunningly gorgeous Fae prince perched on the wall of her cubicle slipped past her tightly erected defenses, she quashed it immediately.

Filed another case. Asked for more work. Became a veritable arbitration machine.

She slogged through the days, pretending they weren't made of wet concrete and she wasn't wearing lead boots. Pretending that each step didn't require Herculean effort. Pretending it wasn't taking all her will merely to force herself to eat, to shower, to get dressed each day.

She lost weight and, in an effort to kill time she might have otherwise been tempted to spend thinking (there would be no thinking, no, none of that at all!), she used some of her suddenly superfluous escape-the-fairy fund to refurbish her wardrobe. She bought new-clothes. Got her hair cut. started wearing it in a sexy new style.

A part of her knew she was only staving off the inevitable. Knew eventually it was going to catch up with her.

Knew that at some point she would have to face one of two inescapable facts:

A) The queen had let Adam die.

B) Adam had used her.

Bottom line was, she intended to avoid facing either of those two heartbreaking options for as long as she possibly could.

Adam was in a vile temper.

Not only had the queen let him get shot— and he'd suffered every ounce of burning agony involved in it, the bite of each and every bullet— she'd yanked him out of the human realm, tossed him back to Faery smack into the middle of the Tuatha Dé Danaan's High Council chambers, healed him but *not* restored him, then confined him to those chambers until she'd returned.

And when she'd returned— what felt like a bloody aeon later— he'd been forced to sit through the entire blasted, infernal, formal hearing, to testify to all he'd seen and all Darroc had done, to answer the most minute and ridiculous questions, all the while seething with impatience to get back to Gabrielle and do what he now understood had to be done.

"Bloody hell," he hissed, "are we *finished* here yet?"

The heads of eight High Council members turned to regard him with imperious, offended stares.

It was impermissible to speak out of turn in council. An unspeakable insult. An unforgivable breach of ritual court manners.

Screw the council. Screw court manners. He had things to take care of. Urgent matters. Not piddling courtly crap.

Adam shot an irritated glare at Aoibheal. "You said I could decide his punishment and that you would restore me. Get on with it already. Restore me."

"You speak with a mortal's impatience," Aoibheal said coolly.

"Maybe," he growled, "because I'm stuck in a mortal form. *Fix me already.*"

She arched a delicate brow, shrugged. Spoke softly in a rush of Tuatha Dé words.

And Adam sighed with pleasure as he felt himself changing. Becoming himself again.

Immortality.

Invincibility.

A veritable demigod.

Pure power thrumming through his ... well, he no longer had veins. But who needed veins when there was splendid, glorious, intoxicating power at his very core? Energy, heat, prowess, strength. All the possibilities in the universe at his fingertips.

And, bloody hell, it felt good. *He* felt good.

There were no aches, no pains in Tuatha Dé form. There was no weakness, no hunger, no weariness, no need to eat or drink or piss.

Absolute power. Absolute control.

The world again at his disposal, again his favorite toy.

"Now you may cry sentence, Adam," Aoibheal said.

Adam pondered Darroc in silence.

Aoibheal whispered a soft command and suddenly the Sword of Light, the hallowed weapon capable of killing an immortal, the blade with which he'd long ago scarred Darroc, appeared in her hand.

And he knew that she expected him to demand Darroc's immediate soulless death. It was what he, too, had believed he would claim.

But suddenly that seemed far too merciful. The bastard had tried to kill his petite *ka-lyrra*, to extinguish the life of his passionate, sexy, vibrant Gabrielle.

"Do it," Darroc snarled, staring fixedly at him. "Get it over with."

"A soulless death by blade is too good for you, Darroc."

Darroc snorted. "You live like a beast in a cage, and you no longer even see the bars. I was only trying to free you, free us all."

"And enslave the human race."

"They were born to be enslaved. By their very nature. Weak, puny things."

And there it was, Adam realized with a faint smile, precisely the sentence the arrogant Elder should bear. "Make him human, my Queen. Condemn him to die in the human realm."

The queen laughed softly. "Well spoken, Adam; we are pleased. Both fitting and fair."

"You can't do this to me," raged Darroc. "I will *not* live as one of

them! Bloody kill me *now!*"

Adams smile deepened.

Aoibheal moved forward, speaking in the ancient tongue, circling around the Elder, faster and faster, until but a radiant swirl of light spun on the floor of the chamber.

As Adam watched, the light grew blindingly intense, then suddenly Darroc and the queen reappeared.

Adam eyed his ancient nemesis curiously. There was something... different about him. His human appearance was somehow unlike Adam's human appearance had been. But what? Rubbing his jaw thoughtfully, he scrutinized the ex-Elder.

Tall, powerful, beautiful as all the Fae. Long gold-shot copper hair spilling to his waist. Chiseled, aristocratic face etched with disdain. Copper eyes glittering with rage— ah, his eyes! They were human eyes, with no unnatural iridescence or fiery golden sparks flickering within them.

And, although Darroc still presented an exotic, stunningly masculine beauty only rarely glimpsed in the human realm (and then usually immortalized on stage or screen), he no longer had that brush of otherworldliness that Adam had never lost. Despite an ineffable sense of ancientness, Darroc would pass as human in nearly any quarter.

"I don't get it," Adam murmured. "He looks different than I did."

"Of course he does," said Aoibheal. "He's now human."

"Yes, but so was I."

The queen laughed, a silvery sound. "No you weren't"

Adam blinked. "Yes, I was; you made me human yourself."

"You were never human, Adam. You were always Tuatha Dé. I merely played with your form a bit, made you as close to human as I could get you without actually transforming you into one of them. I heightened your senses, made you believe you were mortal. You yourself had diminished your essence by healing the Highlander. But you were never human. It's the one form I cannot shapeshift our people between. Once I give a Tuatha Dé a human form, it is irreversible. What I just did to Darroc can never be undone. No one and nothing in all the realms can prevent him now from dying, human and soulless. A year, fifty years, who knows? He will die."

"But I felt human feelings," Adam protested.

"Impossible," Aoibheal said flatly.

Adam frowned, confounded. But he'd *felt* them. He'd felt pain in his chest where he'd thought he'd had a heart. He'd gotten a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach whenever Gabrielle had been in danger. He'd suffered human feelings. How was that possible if he'd never been in human form?

He shook his head abruptly, scattering the questions from his head, to puzzle over later. There were far more important matters to which he needed to attend. And quickly, before Aoibheal decided to constrain him in some new fashion for some ridiculous reason.

While the queen was occupied with summoning her guard to escort Darroc to the human realm and bring in her consort Mael, whom Darroc had betrayed as his accomplice, Adam

quietly tensed to sift out.

Suddenly the queen's head swiveled in his direction and she snapped furiously, "You will stop that this *instant*, Amadan D—"

But she'd spoken too late to compel him— he was already gone.

* * *

Adam went first to the Queen's Royal Bower.

Once before he'd stolen the elixir of life from her private chambers.

Now he did so again.

A tiny glass vial containing a tiny amount of shimmering silvery liquid.

And as he sifted about, displacing his residue before heading for Cincinnati, he reflected on those last moments he'd spent with Gabrielle.

You're not falling for me, are you, Irish? he'd asked. And she'd blown up at him.

Launched into a furious, rambling diatribe that hadn't made much sense to him, possibly because he'd tuned most of it out upon realizing after the first few sentences that there'd been no

"yes" in there anywhere and she hadn't sounded remotely as if she'd been leading up to one.

And then she'd demanded to know why Morganna had refused the elixir of life, and something inside him had snapped.

Christ, it was always souls. Souls, souls, souls. And his great, big fucking lack thereof.

He could have offered her a pretty lie— he'd fabricated several smooth ones for just such an occasion— but anger, defiance, and an age-old hurt had filled him with a wildness, a need he'd been unable to deny.

To cram his reality down her throat. To say, *This is what I am, for Christ's sake, is it so bloody awful?*

See me. *See me!*

And she'd seen him.

Ah, yes, he'd *forced her* to see him.

And she'd gazed at him with horror in those lovely green-gold eyes. Those eyes that only the night before had been dreamy with passion, soft and warm and inviting. Those eyes that had made him feel every inch a man, more alive and at peace and at home than he'd ever felt in his entire existence.

And that was when he'd finally understood.

He'd been a fool with Morganna. He'd made a huge mistake.

He had no intention of making the same one with Gabrielle.

Now that he was all-powerful again, he would erase Gabrielle's memory of his admission. He would eliminate all those facts

that she'd found so distasteful, wipe them cleanly from her mind.

Then he would slip her the elixir of life. And he would whisk her off and keep her blissfully occupied, keep her enchanted by whatever means necessary, for as many years as it took for her immortal soul to burn out.

And when her soul was finally gone, she would no longer even *feel* those parts of herself that made her try to cling to it. She wouldn't even know to miss it.

And she would be *his forever*.

* * *

As long as she possibly could turned out to be exactly one month, seven days, and fourteen hours.

Gabby would have made it longer, but once again, she was undone by yet another diabolical iced cup of coffee to go.

To her credit, she did briefly contemplate that giving up her addiction might greatly simplify her life. Still, by the time she'd arrived at that conclusion, it was too late.

Friday night. Date night. She stayed at the office late, knowing couples would be walking the streets of her neighborhood this evening, holding hands, talking and laughing, enjoying the light

kiss of fall in the early September air.

Classes had begun again, and though her load was heavy, she'd kept her job at Little & Staller, rearranging her hours around her class schedule, in a desperate bid to stay busy enough that she couldn't think.

Upon leaving for the evening, she ducked into Starbucks and grabbed said dastardly iced coffee before going to retrieve her shiny BMW from the upscale paid lot she'd treated herself to with a bit more of her escape-the-fairy fund.

She slid behind the wheel, pretending the faintest scent of jasmine and sandalwood did *not* still linger in the plush leather interior.

Part of her had wanted to sell the car, to erase that reminder of Adam from her life, the same way she'd packed up the crystal and china he'd left on her dining room table, his T-shirt, and all the gifts he'd given her. and tucked them away in a trunk in the attic.

Unfortunately, she'd needed something to drive and the thought of selling the car and trying to buy a new one was more than she could dredge up the energy to even contemplate doing.

Just like returning the seventeen phone messages Gwen and Chloe had left in the past week would have taken too much energy.

It seemed the note she'd sent them a few days after she'd gotten home hadn't been enough. Granted, it had been brief: *Gwen, Chloe, things didn't work out like I hoped. But I'm okay, just real busy at work. I'll call you sometime. G.*

She knew what they wanted. They wanted answers. Wanted to

know what had happened with Darroc, with Adam. She didn't have any answers to give them.

She hadn't gotten the Happily-Ever-After they'd gotten, and she simply couldn't face delving into her misery with such shiny, happy people. People who had all those things she'd hoped for: devoted husbands, beautiful babies, lives rich with love and laughter.

They would want answers about *her*. They would want to know how she was *really* feeling, and once they had her on the phone they wouldn't permit any evasion. Their empathy and kindness would unravel her. She knew that the day she called them back would be the day she fell apart.

Hence, she wasn't calling them back. Period. *Not falling apart. Not on the meticulously controlled agenda right now.*

And if they arrived unannounced at her house, as they'd threatened in their message last night, well... she'd deal with that then.

Ten minutes later. Gabby pulled into the alley behind her house. Exhaling gustily, she slung her purse over her shoulder, grabbed her briefcase, her gym bag, a teetering stack of files that hadn't fit in the briefcase because she needed a *lot* of work to get her through the weekend sane, then balanced her coffee on top of it all, wedging the plastic lid firmly beneath the underside of her chin to hold it all steady.

She made it all the way into the living room before losing control of the unwieldy load.

Files slipped one way, the briefcase the other, then the coffee went, tumbling from beneath her chin, bounced off an end

table, knocked over a pile of books and magazines, and drenched it all with dark, iced liquid.

Cursing under her breath, she began snatching coffee-stained files from the floor.

And that was when she saw it.

Since the day she'd gotten home from Scotland, she'd been avoiding the turret library, refusing to go in, in no frame of mind to be able to even so much as glimpse the O'Callaghan *Books of the Fae*.

Not even noticing that all this time the *Book of the Sin Siriche Du* had been lying on the end table near the sofa.

It was now facedown in a puddle of coffee.

It was going to be ruined!

She pounced on it, snatched it from the thick, muddy spill of icy liquid, and frantically dabbed it off on the sofa, heedless of the mess she was making of the flowered upholstery.

Thumbed it open to assess the damage.

And as Fate— which Gabby was seriously beginning to believe was wont to masquerade as seemingly innocuous cups of coffee — would have it, the slender black tome parted to a page that hadn't been there before.

His elegant, arrogant, slanted cursive. She read it once, twice, a third time, flinching as the words slammed into her.

I will never stay with another human woman and watch her die. Never.

And there it was.

Her answer had been there all along.

No, he didn't die. He'd *chosen* not to come back.

An anguished cry built in her throat and she tried desperately to swallow it, but she'd been swallowing her feelings too long. Day after day she'd been denying the pain in her heart, managing to stay in a state of limbo by arguing the case to herself that so long as she accepted no outcome, there was nothing to grieve.

She could no longer pretend. He was gone. And he wasn't coming back.

Tears stung her eyes, blinding her. Clutching the book to her chest, Gabby sank to the floor, sobbing.

* * *

Because she was a *Sidhe-seer*, because he knew the *féth fiada* didn't work on her, and because he had an irresistible urge to spy on her unseen for a few moments before completing that for which he'd come. Adam popped into Gabrielle's kitchen a dimensional sliver beyond her perception, the tiny bottle of elixir cupped loosely in his hand.

He inhaled. Ah, he'd missed this, the scent of her! A faint, utterly feminine scent of vanilla and heather and sunshine.

The house was dimly lit, and he moved through it, seeking her. She was here, he could feel her.

Ahead of him in the living room, a light was on.

He stepped into the doorway and there she was. Sitting cross-legged on the floor with her back to him. Beautiful as ever. Dressed in a trim-fitting, short-skirted black suit (by Danu, he'd missed those sweet legs!— especially wrapped around his waist), with sexy little heels on her feet. Jacket nipped in at the waist, accenting her hips and full breasts.

But she looked different. Frowning, he stepped into the room, circling to her side. Thinner— he didn't like that at all. He liked his woman built like a woman. Liked the way she'd been before, soft and nicely rounded. Christ, how much time had passed? he wondered. He always lost track of it when he was immortal; time passed at a slower pace in the Fae realm than it did in the human one. Her hair was styled differently, too, but that, he decided, eyeing her, looked sexy as hell, though he couldn't quite get a good look at it with her head down like that and all of it spilling around her face.

A soft, wet sniffing sound came from behind the silky curtain of hair.

He cocked his head, moving to stand before her, looking down.

Was she crying?

Just then she raised her head, and Adam sucked in a breath at his first glimpse of her face. Her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks tear-stained, and she looked so fragile and heartbroken that it pierced him to his very core.

Who had hurt his woman? What bastard had made her cry?

He'd kill the SOB!

Then he realized that she was holding a book in her lap.

His book.

Had *he* made her cry?

As he watched, more tears spilled down her cheeks, dropping onto the soft black leather of the tome. She traced her fingers lightly over the cover. "Damn you, Adam Black," she whispered.

He snorted. Yeah, well, he'd heard that often enough to last an eternity.

Scowling, he began to reach down, to place his hands on her head, to sift through her mind and strip from her that which he should never have told her to begin with.

Reached. Hesitated. Drew back. Cursed himself softly. Reached again.

She spoke then, her voice thick with tears. "I love you, damn it," she said brokenly. "I love you so much and it's killing me. God, I was so stupid. You never cared about me at all, did you? How am I supposed to go on?"

Adam jerked, reeling backward, hands fisting at his sides. He scarcely felt the tiny glass vial imploding in his hand with a soft tinkle of glass.

For a long moment, he couldn't move. Just stood, stunned.

She knew he was Fae.

She knew he had no heart or soul.

She knew he'd done heinous things, and she'd just said she

loved him.

She loved him.

Bloody hell, she *loved him*.

Never *cared* about her? Was she crazy? It was all about her! Every bit of it! Every action he'd made, every thought he'd had since that night he'd first seen her had been all about her! Not for a single moment had she been out of his thoughts. She was *inside* him. Part of him now.

How could she not know that? With every gift he'd chosen for her he'd been saying it. Every time he'd buried himself inside her body he'd been trying to tell her! It had been in his every kiss, his every touch, silent, because he'd not wanted words thrown back in his face. But even in his words it had been there.

Sort of.

In the peculiar way human males spoke of such things. Or so his millennia of spying on them had taught him.

How could she not have known that every time he'd said, "*You're not falling for me, are you, Irish?*" it had been his declaration that he *was*. Bloody hell, even back there on the train he'd known it.

Known he was doing the stupidest thing possible. Falling for a human. But he could no more have stopped himself from falling for her than he could have stopped that train from hurtling to its destination.

You're not falling for me, are you, Irish?

That had been her cue to say "*Urn, well, maybe I am a little,*" and then he could have said, "*Well, um, fancy that; maybe I am*

too."

Simple, concise, direct male communication. Right? Wasn't that how men went about it? Had all his spying been on skewed samples of the population? Had he misinterpreted what he'd observed?

She loves me.

He was awed by it, stilled by it.

He glanced down at the shimmering silver liquid dripping from his fist.

And a moment of crystalline clarity shivered around him, settled into his being.

He opened his hand and slowly relinquished what remained of the vial. With a flexing of Tuatha Dé will, he consigned the spilled elixir and broken vial to a faraway, forgotten dimension where it would hopefully do no harm.

He finally understood that Morganna had been right all along—he *hadn't* loved her.

Love would never imperil, never vanquish another's soul.

The intense pressure behind his sternum was suddenly back, that seizing in his chest, that tense feeling in his stomach. The sensations built and spread, and he nearly doubled over from the intensity of it. And he suddenly apprehended the sum of his existence as nothing more than a culmination of a series of events destined to lead him to a specific bench on a specific night at a precise moment.

To this woman.

He stared down at Gabrielle.

She was sobbing, head bowed, face buried in her hands.

In her grief, she glowed even more brilliantly golden; passion being the seat of the soul. She was so beautiful with that divine radiance illumining her from within, the very essence of who and what she was. He felt sick to think he'd nearly taken it from her. He could never take Gabrielle's soul.

Nor, however, could he stand to watch her die.

Nor, however, was he willing to live without her.

Which left him, he realized, only one other option.

25

Queen Aoibheal eyed the spot where only moments before the last prince of the *D'Jai* had stood before her in her Royal Bower.

Adam was gone now. Gone to the human realm.

She sighed, feeling weary to the very core of her being. She'd argued with him, she'd bribed, she'd threatened. But nothing she'd said had succeeded in swaying him.

This is the sentence you chose as punishment for Darroc's crimes, Adam—yet now you would request it for yourself?

Yes.

You know the transformation cannot be undone! I cannot save you should you change your mind. Unlike your other adventures, there can be no last-minute reprieve.

I understand.

You will die, Adam! One mortal life— and none can vouchsafe how long— then gone.

I understand.

You have no soul. You wont be able to follow your Sidhe-seer when she dies.

I know.

By Danu! Then, why?

So calmly he'd stood before her, so composed. So regal and beautiful and so— she'd come swiftly to understand— very far beyond her reach.

I don't want to live without her, Aoibheal. I love her. An elegant shrug. More than life itself.

That was so utterly inconceivable to Aoibheal that she'd been momentarily unable to fathom an argument to counter it.

Make me human, Aoibheal.

As she'd paused, trying to decide if she should continue arguing, or simply confine him somewhere— in the belly of a mountain, perhaps deep beneath the ocean— until the *Sidhe-seer* was long dead, he'd knelt before her, without a trace of his trademark arrogance and pride.

Her vainglorious, impetuous, wild prince had bowed his head. Humbly.

And he'd said a word she'd not heard pass those beautiful, sensual lips, not once in six thousand years:

Please.

In that moment, she knew she'd lost him.

That if she did anything other than grant his request, she would make of him— her most favored prince— her greatest enemy. Not that he could harm her, considering how much more powerful she was (though, given how unpredictable he was, she wasn't *entirely* certain of that), but if she had to lose him, it would not be to hatred of her. She would yield him to another woman first, despite the sting of it.

Aoibheal closed her eyes, her hands clenching into delicate fists. Had she imagined, for even a moment, when she'd chosen his punishment, that things might come to such an end, she'd never have punished him. She would have resisted her Council's counsel and plotted her own course.

As she would do henceforth— in light of the recent betrayal by those closest to her— Council and consort, no less. She no longer had Adam to watch her back.

"Ah, Amadan," she whispered, "I shall miss you, my prince."

* * *

Gabby shook her head as she guided the sporty roadster down the alley behind her house.

A man in a Lexus had followed her halfway home from the grocery store, hopped out at a red light, and tried to give her his phone number.

Men had been hitting on her like crazy lately.

It's because you're so obviously not interested, Chloe had said the other night on the phone. *To many men, it's a challenge they can't resist— a pretty woman who doesn't care.*

Oh, please, it's just the car, Gabby had replied, rolling her eyes. She really *was* going to have to get rid of it. It was attracting all

the wrong kinds of men. Not that there were any right kinds—she'd had a taste of fairy tale, and after that, no mere man could ever hope to compare.

She'd finally returned Gwen's and Chloe's numerous phone messages a week ago— that awful night that she'd found the *Book of the Sin Siriche Du*.

She'd been crying so hard when Chloe had answered that she'd not even been able to manage a "hello."

But Chloe had immediately known it was her, and Gwen had picked up on another line, and the MacKeltar wives had cried with her, from across an ocean. They'd tried to coax her to come back and stay with them for a while, but Gabby wasn't ready to see Castle Keltar again.

She might never be ready to see it again. She'd spent the most glorious days and nights of her life in that castle, lost both her virginity and her heart in the Crystal Chamber. She'd worn his diamonds there, become his woman there; she'd perched atop a sheer cliff in the arms of her Fae prince and watched the day being born.

Merely thinking about it brought a mist of tears to her eyes.

Nope, definitely not ready to go back to Scotland.

Gathering her groceries, she set the car alarm and hurried up the steps to the back door. She was just slipping the key in the lock when the door was pulled open from the inside so abruptly that she stumbled inward with it.

Smack into a rock-hard body.

She jerked, flailing backward. The groceries slid from her

suddenly limp arms, and her eyes flew wide.

"Hello, Gabrielle," Adam said.

Her knees buckled.

* * *

"Stop *manhandling* me!"

"I'm not manhandling you." Adam said mildly, taking full advantage of Gabrielle's prone position to run his palm over her luscious, shapely behind. The moment she'd begun to go down, he'd swept her up and tossed her over his shoulder. "You swooned. I merely caught you."

"I do *not* swoon. I have never swooned in my entire life." Gabrielle shouted, thumping him in the back with her palms. "And that's *my* bottom, not yours, so quit touching it!"

Adam laughed. Ah, how he'd missed his fiery *ka-lyrra!*.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, Gabrielle. Seeing as how your bottom is currently in my hands, not yours, I believe that makes it mine." With a wicked grin, he rubbed her enticing, upturned rump, dipping intimately into the cleft between her cheeks.

"*Oooh*— that's the most ridiculous line of reasoning I've ever heard! What is that— fairy logic? Nine-tenths arrogance, and

one-tenth brute force? Put me down. What did you do? Get in trouble again? Need a little *Sidhe-seer* help? Well, too bad. Go *away*."

He patted her bottom and continued to tote her through the house at a swift pace, making for the stairs. "I'm never going away, *ka-lyrra*," he purred, savoring the soft, supple weight of her against his body. It felt like a century since last he'd held her.

"Sure. Yeah, right. Go ahead, make some more empty fairy promises. I'm not falling for them this time. I'm not playing whatever stupid game you've got in mind. You can't just walk out on me, only to pop back in whenever you feel like it. There's no Open Door policy here. Hey— take me back downstairs! What do you think you're doing? Where are you taking me?" she snapped.

He turned his face into her and nipped her thigh with a playful love bite. "To bed, Gabrielle."

"I so don't think so," she hissed, promptly launching into a tirade about how he was *never* going to bed with her again. That she may have been gullible once, but she wasn't anymore. That he'd cured her of *all* her illusions. Wriggling like a wee hellion over his shoulder, she icily informed him that she had no interest whatsoever in having such a heartless bastard in her life to *any* degree, that she hated him, and that she only wished he were mortal so he could die and burn in hell for all eternity.

When he tossed her down on her bed, it knocked a bit of the breath from her, which gave him time to say, "You hate me, Gabrielle? That's a bloody shame. Because I meant it when I said I'm not leaving. I'm never leaving. I'm in love with you."

His *ka-lyrra* went still as stone, her mouth frozen open in a desperate bid for breath. Her throat worked convulsively. Then, with a great, indrawn screech of air, she launched herself at him, a flying, hissing female catapult of fists and tears.

It occurred to him, as he went crashing down to the floor beneath her, that he might well *never* understand women.

* * *

Gabby lay on the floor in Adam's arms, her head spinning.

He'd let her pummel him until she'd exhausted herself. He'd let her rage and yell and weep, enduring it all in patient silence until— crying so hard she couldn't breathe— she'd begun hiccuping uncontrollably. Then he'd rolled her onto her side, pulled her back against his powerful body, wrapped his arms around her, and held her until she'd calmed, whispering soft reassurances in her ear. "Shh, sweet. Be easy, love. It's okay. Everything's okay."

Love? Adam was saying the L-word? Into what impossible fairy tale had she fallen?

"Am I awake? Is this a dream?" she whispered.

"If it is," he whispered back, "I ask only that it go on forever. Not the crying part," he clarified, "the holding-you-in-my-arms part." He turned her gently then, to face him.

She buried her face in his chest, sniffing, trying to understand what was going on. Afraid to believe she was awake. Afraid that the moment she let herself believe it, she would wake up. Find herself alone in bed, in her big, silent house.

"Look at me, *ka-lyrra*," he said quietly.

With a little snuffle. Gabby tipped her head back and met his dark gaze. And frowned, bemused. She'd been so stupefied to find him in her house that she'd not really taken a good look at him. Something about him was different. But what? His eyes?

"I love you, Gabrielle O'Callaghan."

The words slammed into her; she stared at him mutely.

He kissed her then, his mouth slanting hard over hers, his velvety tongue gliding deep. And she gave herself over to it. Dream or not, it was real enough for her. She was in his arms and he was saying he loved her and if she was asleep, she just hoped she could stay asleep forever.

Even his kiss was different, she realized dimly, as her body flared to frantic, sizzling life in his arms. It held a touch of urgency that had never been there before. It was no longer shaped by immortal leisure but held a very human desperation, a mortal hunger and passion.

And it shook her so deeply that she went wild, kissing him back fiercely, pushing him back to the floor, clambering on top of him, burying her hands in his hair. Kissing and kissing him, with weeks of grief and longing and need.

How their clothing came off, she had no idea, only knew that moments later they were both naked on the floor of her bedroom and she was beneath him, and he was pushing inside

her.

And she was alive again. There was blood in her veins, not ice. There was a heart in her chest, not—

"Adam." she gasped, stunned. "I can feel your heart beating." She'd never felt it before. Even though he'd been human, not once had she ever felt the powerful thud of his heart beneath her palm, the throb of a pulse at his neck.

And she'd never even noted their absence until this moment, when she was feeling them.

He drew back, his darkly beautiful face taut with lust. "I know." He flashed her a brilliant smile. Then he began moving inside her and she forgot all about a heartbeat she'd never felt before. Gave herself over to pure sensation. And the turret bedroom was filled with the wild, impassioned sounds of a woman and her Fae prince making love.

* * *

Later, Adam told her everything.

Well, nearly everything. He omitted that he'd almost taken her soul. And since she didn't know that he'd tricked them to begin with, he didn't bother mentioning that he'd told Circenn and Lisa the truth about the elixir of life, then taken them to the queen so she could restore them to their mortal state.

He'd made amends as best he could. He refused to be damned for wrongs righted, or for things he'd "almost" done. He wasn't the man he'd once been.

He told her what had become of Darroc. He told her how time moved differently between the realms, and that he'd never meant to leave her alone for so long.

Speaking quietly, holding her close, he told her how he'd realized that there was no way he would be able to stand living with her and watching her die, as he'd done with Morganna.

The moment those words left his lips, Gabrielle tensed in his arms, jerked from his embrace, and shot straight up in bed. "Oh!" she hissed, eyes flashing furiously. "Then, what did you come back for? Are you telling me you're *leaving* me again?"

He shook his head hastily, and explained that— although he'd believed he was human— he'd never been. That the queen had only made him *think* he was mortal to punish him. He told her what the queen had said about such a transformation being irreversible for a Tuatha Dé.

And he told her that he'd finally realized that, since he couldn't bear to live without her, yet he couldn't bear to watch her die, there was only one choice left to him.

"The reason you can feel my heartbeat, *ka-lyrra*, is because now I really *am* human. It's for real this time."

Gabby's eyes widened and she stared at him, her lower lip trembling. "But you just said it's irreversible."

He nodded.

"You mean, you're going to *die*?" she whispered.

Cupping her head in his hands. Adam pulled her down for a deep, possessive kiss. "No, *ka-lyrra*, I mean, I'm finally going to live. Here. Now. With you." He drew a breath. "Marry me, Gabrielle. I'll give you the life you've always wanted. I can now. I'm human, just like you. Let me be your husband and give you babies. Let me spend the rest of my life with you."

"Oh, God," Gabby breathed, tears welling up in her eyes, "you gave up your *immortality* for me?"

He caught her tears with his tongue as they slipped down her cheeks, kissing them away. "No tears, Gabrielle. I have no regrets. Not one."

"How can you say that? You gave up *everything!* Immortality. Invincibility. All that it is to be a Tuatha Dé!"

He shook his head. "I *gained* everything. Or at least I'll think so," he growled, suddenly impatient, anxious, "when you give me a bloody answer to my bloody question. How many times are you going to make me ask you? Will you marry me, Gabrielle O'Callaghan? Yes or yes? And in case you're still managing to miss the point, the correct answer is 'yes.' And, by the way, anytime you'd like to tell me you love me, I wouldn't mind hearing it."

She pounced on him delightedly, straddling him, slipped her hands into his hair, and kissed him. He luxuriated in the bliss of her sweet body, closing his arms around her, his tongue gliding deep, tangling with hers.

"I'm going to take this as a yes," he purred, catching her lower lip, tugging playfully at it.

"I love you, Adam Black," Gabby breathed. "And, yes. Oh, *abso-*

freaking-lutely yes!"

EPILOGUE

Five years later

Gabby finished unloading the dishwasher and cocked her head, listening. The house was quiet; their two-year-old son Connor was already down for the night. Soon she would go upstairs, kiss their daughter, Tessa, good night, and lead her husband off to bed.

Professor Black.

She shook her head, smiling. Adam couldn't look less like a professor, with his chiseled face and those sexy dark eyes and that long black hair, not to mention that rippling, powerful body. He looked more like... well, a Fae prince masquerading as a professor, and doing a rather shoddy job of it at that.

When he'd first told her that he intended to teach history at the university, she'd laughed

Too everyday, too plebeian, she'd thought. He'll never do it.

He'd surprised her. But then, he often did.

He'd planned everything out so carefully. Before he'd petitioned the queen to make him human, he'd established a detailed human identity for himself as an extremely wealthy man with vast bank accounts and a thousand acres of prime land in the Highlands. A human identity complete with all the necessary paperwork and credentials to permit him to live a normal life in the human realm.

And when she'd gently scoffed at his announcement of his choice of career, he'd waved those credentials at her— transcripts from the top universities in the nation, no less (of course, he'd made himself brilliant)— and gone off and gotten himself a job.

He'd developed a reputation as a renegade in the field, with all kinds of controversial theories about things like who had built Newgrange and Stonehenge and the true origin of the Proto-Indo-European tongue.

Students had to register for his classes a year in advance.

And she, well, she had her dream job. She and Jay and Elizabeth had opened up their own law firm and just this year had finally begun pulling in the kinds of cases she'd always hoped to represent. Cases that mattered, that made a difference.

They'd begun a family immediately, neither of them had been willing to wait. Time was far too precious to them both.

And, oh, he made beautiful babies! There was Tessa, with black hair and green-gold eyes; Connor, with blond hair and dark eyes; and yet another on the way.

She pressed a palm to her abdomen, smiling. She loved being a mother. Adored being married to him. She doubted any woman had ever been more completely and unconditionally loved.

She knew her husband would never stray, so highly did he value that which he'd waited nearly six thousand years to know, so precious was it to him: love. She knew he would be there with her until the very end, that he would cherish each wrinkle, every line in her face, because in the final analysis they were not a negation of life but an affirmation of a life well lived. Proof

positive of laughter and tears, of joy and grief, of passion, of *living*. Every facet of being human was amazing to him, each and every change of season a triumph, a taste of unbearable sweetness. Never had a man lived who savored life more.

Life was rich and full.

She couldn't have asked for more.

Well... actually... she amended with a little inner flinch, she could have.

Though most of the time she looked at Adam and just felt awed and humbled that this big, wonderful man had given up so much to love her, sometimes she hated that he didn't have a soul, and sometimes she wanted to hate God.

And she had a dream, a silly dream perhaps, but a dream to which she clung.

They would live to be a hundred, until long after their children and grandchildren were grown, and one day they would go to bed and lie down facing each other, and die like that, at the same moment, in each other's arms.

And this was her dream: that maybe, just maybe, if she loved him hard enough and true enough and deep enough, and if she held on to him tightly enough as they died, she could take him with her wherever it was that souls went. And there she would do what was in her blood, what she now knew she'd been born for; she would stand before God, a *brehon*, and she would argue the greatest, the most important case of her life.

And she would win.

* * *

"I don't understand, Daddy." Tessa said. "Why did the rabbit have to lose his fur to be real?"

Adam closed the book. *The Velveteen Rabbit*, and glanced down at his daughter.

She was tucked in bed, blankets to her chin, staring up at him. His precious Tessa, with her oodles of shiny black ringlets tumbling around her chubby angelic face, with her quick mind, and incessant curiosity, and her daddy's heart wrapped oh-so-snugly around her chubby little finger.

"Because that's part of becoming real."

"Eew. I don't want to be real. I want to be pretty like the fairy queen. Oops"— she clapped a tiny hand over her- mouth—"wasn't 'posed to say that."

In the doorway, Gabby gasped softly, and Adam glanced up immediately, arching a brow at her, a silent question in his eyes.

I've never told her anything about fairies, Gabby mouthed.
Have you?

He shook his head. They'd both assumed Tessa wasn't a *Sidhe-seer*. Gabrielle hadn't seen a single Tuatha Dé since that day Darroc had ambushed them in Scotland five years ago, and they'd assumed Aoibheal must have stripped the Fae-vision from the O'Callaghan line.

"What fairy queen, Tessa?" Adam said softly. "It's okay, you can tell me."

Tessa eyed him doubtfully. "She said you'd get mad if you knew she came."

"I won't get mad," he assured her, smoothing her tousled ringlets.

"Promise, Daddy?"

"Promise. Cross my heart. What fairy queen, sweet?"

"Ah-veel."

Adam inhaled sharply, glancing at Gabrielle again.

"Does Aoibheal come to see you, Tessa?" Gabby said softly, moving into the room, joining Adam on the edge of Tessa's bed.

Tessa shook her head. "Not me. She comes to see Daddy. She thinks he's pretty."

Adam bit back a laugh at the look his wife shot him then, her eyes narrowed, dainty nostrils flared. She all but growled. He loved that she got a little jealous sometimes, adored her possessiveness. Suffered from his own fair share of it where his petite *ka-lyrra* was concerned.

"Pretty, huh?" Gabby said dryly.

"*Mmm-hmm*, " Tessa said, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "But I can't see it no matter how hard I try."

Okay, now, that miffed him a bit, Adam thought, disgruntled. Before Tessa had been born, he'd pored over piles of parenting books, determined to be a good father. He thought he'd been

doing a fine job, but wasn't his daughter supposed to have stars in her eyes whenever she looked at him? At least until she hit her teens? (And then God help the man who tried to date his daughter!) So, he had a few tiny lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before, he was still a handsome man! "You don't think I'm pretty, eh, Tessa?" He tickled his daughter's neck, right behind her ear, where it never failed to make her limp with laughter.

" 'Course I do, Daddy." She giggled. Then she gave him a thoroughly four-year-old look of exasperation. "But I can't see what she sees. She says only fairies can."

Adam's heart skipped a beat. It *couldn't* be.

Could it?

"Oh, God," Gabby said weakly, her gaze flying to his. She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth. They stared at each other for a long moment.

Adam nodded, wordlessly encouraging her to ask the question they were both thinking. He'd ask himself, but he couldn't seem to find his tongue.

He knew of only one thing he'd been able to see around humans when he'd been a fairy that humans couldn't see. He could scarcely breathe with wanting it so badly. With aching to be able to follow his wife from this life, into countless others. Five years ago, when he'd wed Gabrielle in a romantic Highland ceremony, the MacKeltars had offered him the use of their Druid binding vows: those sacred vows that united lovers for all eternity. He'd refused to say them— not because he hadn't longed to with every fiber of his being— but because it would have been to no avail, as he'd had no soul with which to bind himself.

Breathlessly Gabby said. "See what, Tessa? What can fairies see that you can't see?"

Tessa yawned. Snuggled deeper into the covers. "That Daddy's all glowy and golden."

Adam's mouth worked, but nothing came out.

"Adam glows golden?" Gabby said faintly.

Tessa nodded. "*Mmm-hmm*. Ah-veel says now he's just like you and me, Mommy."

Gabby made a soft choking sound.

For a long moment Adam couldn't move. He just sat on the edge of Tessa's bed and stared at his wife. She stared back at him, wonderingly, her eyes misting with tears of joy.

Then the enormity of it electrified him, galvanized him into action— there wasn't a moment to waste! If, by some miracle, he'd been gifted with a soul, he wanted it bound to Gabrielle's *now*.

Hastily dropping a kiss on Tessa's brow, Adam turned out the light, scooped Gabrielle up into his arms, and carried her from the room, hastening down the hall to their bedroom.

"*Ka-lyrra*," he said urgently, "there's something I want you to do with me. Vows I want to exchange, but you must know that they will bind our souls together for all eternity. Are you willing? Would you have me forever?"

Laughing and crying at the same time, she nodded.

Exultantly Adam deposited her on her feet, placed the palm of his right hand above her heart, and rested his left above his

own. "Place your hands on top of mine, Gabrielle," he commanded.

When she did so, he spoke with quiet reverence and conviction:

"If aught must be lost, it will be my honor for yours. If one must be forsaken, it will be my soul for yours. Should death come anon, it will be my life for yours. I am *Given*."

Smiling up at him, her eyes sparkling with joy, she repeated the vows, and, the moment she finished, emotion crashed over him so intensely that it nearly brought him to his knees. He felt the bond quickening inside him, heating his blood with fierce passion, as their souls were united for all time.

Backing her against the wall, he buried his hands in her hair, slanted his mouth over hers, and kissed her hungrily.

He had a soul. He knew love. He was pledged to his soul mate forever.

And Adam Black was finally truly immortal.

The End

SPELL OF THE HIGHLANDER

KAREN MARIE MONING

*This one's for my husband, Neil Sequoyah Dover.
Were not there you—I'd be not too.
I love you.*

Synchronicity: *1. The simultaneous occurrence of two or more meaningfully but not causally connected events; 2. The coinciding or alignment of forces in the universe to create an event or circumstance; 3. A collision of possibles so incalculably improbable that it would appear to imply divine intervention.*

Dear Reader—

When I am uncertain how to pronounce certain words in a book, it makes my brain stutter each time they occur in the text, jarring me from the immediacy of the moment. Toward that end, I have attached this brief key of significant names:

Cian: *Key-on*, with a hard C.

Dageus: *Day-gis*, with a hard G.

Drustan: *Drus-tin*, U like drum.

The Draghar: *Druh-gar*, U like drum, hard G.

Tuatha Dé Danaan: *Tua* day dhanna

Aoibheal: *Ah-veel*

FIRST PROLOGUE

Aoibheal, queen of the Fae stood in the catacombs beneath The Belthew Building, concealed by countless layers of illusion, a formless projection of herself, beyond any *Sidhe*-seer's vision, beyond even her own race's perception.

In the dimly lit labyrinthine tombs, Adam Black was pacing furiously, holding his ears and cursing a wailing Chloe Zanders.

But it was not Adam's plight that concerned her now.

It was her own.

Tonight she'd wielded the formidable magic of the Queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan to destroy the Druid sect of the Draghar.

But it was not for that purpose alone she'd done it. As ever, she had motives within motives. Her use of the full power of the High Queen of the Seelie Court of the Light had caused a blackout of all mortal magic throughout Britain, part of Scotland and a fair portion of Wales.

It had shattered wards humans believed unbreakable, voided protections spells, and temporarily leeched all sacred mortal relics of any power they possessed.

Closing her eyes, Aoibheal turned her far-vision outward, analyzing the weft and weck of the fabric of her world. She'd pulled a thread here, tugged a thread there, and the infinitesimal changes she sought had begun.

Somewhere in Tibet an ancient sorcerer was seeking the unholy of Dark Hallows.

Somewhere in London a thief was casing a wealthy residence reputed to contain unimaginable treasures within.

Somewhere a Keltar was biding his time, waiting for a vengeance long overdue.

Ah, yes, it had begun. . . .

SECOND PROLOGUE

Some men are born under a lucky star.

Showered with female attention from the moment of his highly anticipated birth into a family of seven lovely wee Keltar lasses, but, alas, no sons—his da dead to a hunting accident a fortnight earlier—Cian MacKeltar came into the world, at ten pounds three ounces, already laird of the castle. Heady stuff for such a wee bairn.

As he matured into a man, he inherited the typical Keltar looks: wide-shouldered and powerful, all rippling muscle, topped by the dark, savagely beautiful face of an avenging angel. His noble Celt bloodline, true to its aggressive warrior–aristocracy heritage, also bequeathed him a lion’s share of sexuality; a simmering, scarce-contained eroticism that shaped his very walk, underscored his every move.

At a score and ten, Cian MacKeltar was The Sun, The Moon, and The Stars.

And he knew it.

He was a Druid, to boot.

And unlike the vast majority of his broody, overly serious ancestors (not to mention the veritable plethora of broody ones yet to be born), he *liked* being a Druid.

Liked everything about it.

He liked the power that hummed so potently in his veins. He liked cozying up with a flask of whisky among the collection of ancient lore and artifacts in the underground chamber library of Castle Keltar, studying the arcane knowledge, combining a chancy spell with a risky potion, growing stronger and more powerful.

He liked walking the heathery hills after a storm, saying the ancient words to heal the land and the wee beasties. He liked performing the rites of the seasons,

chanting beneath a fat, orange harvest moon, with a fierce Highland wind tangling his long dark hair, and fanning his sacred fires into pillars of flame, knowing that the all-powerful Tuatha Dé Danaan depended upon him.

He liked bedding the lasses, taking their sweet lushness beneath his hard body, using his Druid arts to give them such wild, mindless pleasure as—it was whispered—only an exotic Fae lover could bestow.

He even liked the brush of fear with which much of his world regarded him, as a Keltar Druid and heir to the ancient, terrifying magic of the Old Ones.

The laird responsible for the continuation of the sacred Keltar legacy in the late ninth century was devilishly charming, darkly seductive, and the most powerful Keltar Druid ever to live.

None nay-sayed, none challenged, none ever bested Cian MacKeltar. Verily, the possibility that someone or something one day might, never even occurred to him.

Until that cursed Samhain of his thirtieth year.

Some men are born under a lucky star.

Cian MacKeltar was not one of them.

Shortly thereafter, the underground chamber library was sealed off, never to be mentioned again, and all record of Cian MacKeltar was stricken from the Keltar written annals.

It is highly debated among surviving Keltar progeny whether or not this controversial ancestor ever even existed.

And none know that now—some eleven hundred years later—Cian MacKeltar still lives.

Sort of . . . in a hellish manner of speaking.

PART 1

CHICAGO

1

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6TH

The call that changed the entire course of Jessi St. James's life came on an utterly unremarkable, dateless Friday night that differed in no particularly significant way from any other unremarkable, dateless Friday night in her all-too-predictable life, which—she was in no hurry to discuss—were a *lot* of Friday nights.

She was sitting in the dark on the fire escape outside the kitchen window of her third-floor apartment at 222 Elizabeth Street, enjoying an unseasonably warm autumn evening. She was being a shameless voyeur, peeping around the corner of the brownstone to watch a crowd of people that, unlike her, had time to have a life, and were talking and laughing out on the sidewalk in front of the nightclub across the street.

For the past few minutes she'd been riveted by a leggy redhead and her boyfriend—a dark-haired, sun-bronzed, muscled hottie in jeans and a white T-shirt. He kept backing his girlfriend up against the wall, stretching her hands above her head, and kissing her like there was no tomorrow, getting into it with his whole gorgeous, rippling body. (And would you just *look* at that hip action? The way he was grinding against her—they might as well be doing it right there in the street!)

Jessi sucked in a sharp breath.

God, had she ever been kissed like that? Like the man couldn't wait to get inside her? Like he wanted to devour her, maybe crawl right inside her skin?

The redhead's hands slipped free, down to the hottie's ass, fingers curving into his muscled butt, and Jessi's hands curled into fists.

When the hottie's hands skimmed up the redhead's breasts, his thumbs grazing her nipples, Jessi's own went hard as little pearls. She could almost imagine she was the one he was kissing, that she was the one he was about to have hot, animalistic—

Why can't I have a life like that? she thought.

You can, an inner voice reminded—after *your PhD*.

The reminder wasn't nearly as effective as it had been years ago as an undergrad. She was sick of being in school, sick of being broke, sick of constantly racing from her classes to her full-time job as Professor Keene's assistant, then home to study, or if she was really lucky, snatching a whopping four or five hours of sleep before getting up to do it all over again.

Her demanding, tightly organized schedule left no time for a social life. And lately she'd been feeling downright sulky about it. Everywhere she turned lately there were couples, and they were busy coupling and having a wonderfully couplelicious time of it.

But not her. There was no time for coupling in her life. She wasn't one of the lucky ones that had a free ride through school. She had to scrimp and save and make every moment and penny count. In addition to working full-time and taking a full load of classes, she taught classes too. It barely left her time to eat, shower, and sleep.

On the infrequent occasions she'd tried to date, the guys had gotten so fed up with how seldom she could see them and how low on her list of priorities they seemed to be and how unwilling she was to fall right in bed with them (most college guys seemed to think if they didn't score by the third date there was something wrong with the *woman*—puh-leeze), that they'd soon sought greener pastures.

Still, it would all be worth it soon. Although some people didn't seem to think being an archaeologist and playing with old, dusty, or, frequently, dead things for the rest of one's life was a particularly exciting thing to do (like her mom, who hated Jessi's choice of major and couldn't understand why she wasn't married and blissfully popping out babies like her sisters), Jessi couldn't imagine a more

thrilling career. It might not top other people's lists of dreams, but it was hers.

Dr. Jessica St. James. She was so close she could taste it. Another year and a half and she'd be done with her course work for her PhD.

Then she might date like the Energizer Bunny, making up for lost time. But right now, she'd not worked so hard and gone into so much debt to go screwing everything up just because she seemed to be stuck in some kind of hormonal overdrive.

In a few years, she consoled herself, staring down at the busy street, the people hanging out at that club would probably *still* be hanging out at that club, their lives completely unchanged, while she would be traveling to far-off places, digging up remnants of the past, and having grand adventures.

And who knew, maybe Mr. Right would be waiting for her out there at some future dig site. Maybe her life just wasn't scheduled to take off as fast as everyone else's. Maybe she was just a late bloomer.

Holy cow—the hottie was slipping his hand inside the redhead's jeans. And her hand was on his—oh! Right there in front of God and everybody!

Behind her, somewhere in the cramped and crowded apartment that desperately needed to be cleaned and have the trash taken out, the phone began to ring.

Jessi rolled her eyes. The mundaneness of her existence always chose the most inconvenient moments to intrude.

Ring! Ring!

She gulped another fascinated look at the unabashed display of sex-on-the-sidewalk, then reluctantly boosted herself inside the kitchen window. She shook her head in a vain attempt to clear it, then pulled down the shade. What she couldn't see, couldn't torture her. At least not much, anyway.

Riiiiing!

Where was that blasted phone?

She finally spied it on the sofa, nearly buried beneath pillows, candy wrappers, and a pizza box that contained—*ew*—something fuzzy and phosphorescent green. As she gingerly pushed aside the box, she hesitated, hand suspended in

midair above the phone.

For a moment—the briefest, most peculiar of interludes—she suffered the inexplicable, intense feeling that she shouldn't pick it up.

That she should just let it ring and ring.

Maybe let it ring all weekend.

Later, Jessi would recall that feeling.

Time itself seemed to stand still for that odd, pregnant slice of time, and she had the weirdest sensation that the universe itself had stopped breathing and was waiting to see what she would do next.

She wrinkled her nose at the ridiculous, egocentric thought.

As if the universe ever even *noticed* Jessi St. James.

She picked up the phone.

Lucan Myrddin Trevayne paced before the fire.

When employing a sorcerer's spell to conceal his true appearance—which he did whenever he wasn't completely alone—he was tall, in his early forties, handsome, powerfully built, his thick black hair dashed at the temples with silver. He was a man who turned women's heads, and made men take an instinctive step back when he walked by. His mien said one thing: *Power—I have it, you don't. And if you think you do—try me.* His features were Old World, his eyes cold gray as a loch beneath a stormy sky. His true appearance was far less appealing.

He'd amassed tremendous wealth and power in his lifetime, which had been considerably longer than most. He held controlling interest in many and varied enterprises, from banks to media to oil. He kept residences in a dozen cities. He retained a select group of uniquely trained men and the occasional woman to handle his most private affairs.

To his left, seated in a deep armchair, one of those men waited tensely.

“This is absurd, Roman,” Lucan growled. “What the hell’s taking so long?”

Roman shifted defensively in his chair. He was aptly named, his features as classically handsome as those on an ancient coin, his hair long and blond. “I’ve got men on it, Mr. Trevayne,” he said with the trace of a Russian accent. “The best men we’ve got. The problem is, they went in a dozen different directions. They were sold on the black market. No one has names. It’s going to take time —”

“Time is the one thing I don’t have,” Lucan cut him off sharply. “Every hour, every moment that passes, makes it less likely they’ll be recovered. Those damned things *must* be found.”

“Those damned things” were the Dark or “Unseelie” Hallows of the Tuatha Dé Danaan—artifacts of immense power created by an ancient civilization that had passed, centuries ago and quite erroneously, into Man’s history books as a mythical race: the *Daoine Sidhe* or the Fae.

Lucan had believed there was no better place to safekeep his prized treasures than in his well-warded private residence in London.

He’d been wrong.

Critically wrong.

He wasn’t certain what had happened a few months ago while he’d been out of the country pursuing a lead on the Dark Book, the final and most powerful of the four Unseelie Hallows, but something had transpired somewhere in London—its epicenter in the east side, he could feel the lingering traces of power—that had reverberated through all of England. An immense and ancient power had risen for a brief time, so strong that it had neutralized all other magic in Britain.

Which he wouldn’t have cared about since whatever it was had departed as swiftly as it had come, except for the fact that its rising had shattered formidable, allegedly unbreakable wards that protected his most prized possessions. Protected them so well that he’d found the notion of a modern-day security system laughable.

Not so laughable now.

He’d had a state-of-the-art system installed, with cameras in every room,

sweeping every angle, because while he'd been away, a thief had broken into his museum of a home and stolen artifacts that had belonged to him for centuries—including his irreplaceable Hallows: the box, amulet, and mirror.

Fortunately the thief had been spotted by neighbors while hauling away his loot. Unfortunately, by the time Lucan's select staff had managed to identify and track the bastard, he'd already sold the artifacts to the first in a series of elusive middlemen.

Artifacts such as his, fabulous and utterly lacking provenance, inevitably ended up in one of two places: with the legal authorities of one country or another after being intercepted in transit, or sold for a fraction of their worth on the black market before disappearing, sometimes for hundreds of years before so much as a whispered rumor was heard of them again. They'd gotten few names—and those, obvious aliases—from the thief before he'd died. For months now, Lucan's men had been chasing a deliberately and cunningly muddled trail. And time was growing critical.

“ . . . though we've recovered three of the manuscripts and one of the swords, we've learned nothing about the box or amulet. But it looks like we might have a solid lead on the mirror,” Roman was saying.

Lucan stiffened. The mirror. The Dark Glass was the one Hallow he needed urgently. Of all the years it might have been stolen, it'd had to be this one, when the tithe was due! The other Dark Hallows could wait a bit longer, though not long; they were far too dangerous to have loose in the world. Each of the Hallows conferred a gift upon its possessor for a price, if the possessor had the knowledge and the power to use it. The mirror's Dark Gift was immortality, so long as he met its conditions. He'd been meeting its conditions for over a thousand years now. He intended to continue.

“A shipment rumored to fit the bill left England for the States via Ireland a few days ago. We believe it's headed for some university in Chicago, to a—”

“Then why the fuck are you still sitting here?” Lucan said coldly. “If you have a lead, any lead at all on the glass, I want you on it personally. *Now.*” It was imperative he recover the mirror before Samhain. Or else.

That “or else” was a thing he refused to contemplate. The mirror would be found, the tithe paid; a small quantity of pure gold passed through the glass every one hundred years—in the Old Ones way of marking time, which was

more than a century by modern standards—at precisely midnight on Samhain, or Halloween as the current century called it. Twenty-six days from today the century’s tithe was due. Twenty-six days from today the mirror *must* be in his possession—or The Compact binding his captive to it would be broken.

As the blond man gathered his coat and gloves, Lucan reiterated his position where the Dark Hallows were concerned. “No witnesses, Roman. Anyone who’s caught so much as even a glimpse of one of the Hallows . . .”

Roman inclined his head in silent concurrence.

Lucan said no more. There was no need. Roman knew how he liked things handled, as did all who worked for him and continued to live.

Some time later, shortly after midnight, Jessi was back on campus for the third time that day, in the south wing of the Archaeology Department, unlocking Professor Keene’s office.

She wondered wryly why she even bothered leaving. Given the hours she kept, she’d be better off tucking a cot into that stuffy, forgotten janitor’s closet down the hall, amid mops and brooms and pails that hadn’t been used in years. She’d not only get more sleep, she’d save on gas money too.

When the professor had called her from the hospital to tell her that he’d been in a “bit of a fender bender” on his way back to campus—“*a few inconvenient fractures and contusions, not to worry,*” he’d assured her swiftly—she’d been expecting him to ask her to pick up his classes for the next few days (meaning her sleep window would dwindle from four or five hours to a great, big, fat nil), but he’d informed her he’d already called Mark Trudeau and arranged for him to take his classes until he returned.

I’ve a wee favor to ask of you, though, Jessica. I’ve a package coming. I was to accept a delivery at my office this evening, he’d told her in his deep voice that, even after twenty-five years away from County Louth, Ireland, had never lost its lilt.

She *loved* that lilt. Couldn’t wait to one day hear a whole pub speaking it while she washed down a hearty serving of soda bread and Irish stew with a perfectly poured Guinness. After, of course, having spent an entire day in the National

Museum of Ireland delightedly poring over such fabulous treasures as the Tara Brooch, the Ardagh Chalice, and the Broighter Gold Collection.

Hugging the phone between ear and shoulder, she'd glanced at her watch, the luminous dial indicating ten minutes past ten. *What kind of package gets delivered so late at night?* she'd wondered aloud.

You needn't concern yourself with that. Just sign for it, lock it up, and go home. That's all I need.

Of course, Professor, but what—

Just sign, lock it up, and forget about it, Jessica. A pause, a weighty silence, then: *I see no reason to mention this to anyone. It's personal. Not university business.*

She'd blinked, startled; she'd never heard such a tone in the professor's voice before. Words sharply clipped, he'd sounded defensive, almost . . . well, paranoid.

I understand. I'll take care of it. You just rest, Professor. Don't you worry about a thing, she'd soothed hastily, deciding that whatever pain meds he was getting were making him funny, the poor dear. She'd once had Tylenol with codeine that had made her feel itchy all over, short-tempered and irritable. With multiple fractures, it was a sure bet he'd been given something stronger than Tylenol 3.

Now, standing beneath the faintly buzzing fluorescent lights in the university hallway, she rubbed her eyes and yawned hugely. She was exhausted. She'd gotten up at six-fifteen for a seven-twenty class and by the time she got home tonight—er, this morning—and managed to fall back into bed, she would have put in another twenty-hour day. Again.

Turning the key in the lock, she pushed open the office door, fumbled for the light switch, and flipped it on. She inhaled as she stepped into the professor's office, savoring the scholarly blend of books and leather, fine wood polish, and the pungent aroma of his favorite pipe tobacco. She planned to one day have an office of her own very much like it.

The spacious room had built-in floor-to-ceiling bookcases and tall windows that, during the day, spilled sun across an intricately woven antique rug of wine, russet, and amber. The teak-and-mahogany furniture was formally masculine: a

stately claw-foot desk; a sumptuous leather Chesterfield sofa in a deep, burnished coffee-bean hue; companion wing chairs. There were numerous glass-paned curio cabinets and occasional tables displaying his most prized replica pieces. A reproduction Tiffany lamp graced his desk. Only his computer, with its twenty-one-inch flat screen, belied the century. Remove it, and she might have been standing in the library of a nineteenth-century English manor house.

“In here,” she called over her shoulder to the deliverymen.

The package hadn’t turned out to be quite what she’d expected. From the way the professor had spoken of it, she’d imagined a bulky envelope, perhaps a small parcel.

But the “package” was actually a crate, and a huge one at that. It was tall, wide, about the size of a . . . well, a sarcophagus or something, and proving no easy matter to navigate through the university corridors.

“Careful, man. Tilt it! Tilt it! Ow! You’re smashing my finger. Back it up and angle it!”

A muttered “Sorry.” More grunting. “Damn thing’s awkward. Hall’s too frigging narrow.”

“You’re almost here,” Jessi offered helpfully. “Just a bit farther.”

Indeed, moments later, they were carefully lowering the oblong box from their shoulders, depositing it on the rug.

“The professor said I needed to sign something.” She encouraged them to hurry. She had a full day of working and studying tomorrow . . . er, today.

“Lady, we need more than that. This here package don’t get left ’til it’s verified.”

“ ‘Verified’?” she echoed. “What does that mean?”

“Means it’s worth *boo-koo* bucks, and the shipper’s insurer’s got to have visual verification and release. See? Says so right here.” The beefier of the two thrust a clipboard at her. “Don’t care who does it, lady, so long as somebody’s John Hancock’s on my paperwork.”

Sure enough, *Visual Verification and Release Required* was stamped in red across the bill of lading, followed by two pages of terms and definitions detailing

shipper's and buyer's rights in pedantic, inflated legal jargon.

She pushed a hand through her short dark curls, sighing. The professor wasn't going to like this. He'd said it was personal.

"And if I don't let you open it up and inspect it?"

"Goes back, lady. And let me tell you, the shipper's gonna be plenty pissed."

"Yeah," said the other man. "Thing cost an arm and a leg to insure. Goes back, your professor's gonna have to pay the second time around. I bet he's gonna be plenty pissed too."

They stared at her with flat, challenging gazes, clearly disinclined to wrestle the awkward crate back up on their shoulders, squeeze it back down the hall, reload it and return it, only to end up delivering it again. They weren't even talking to her breasts, a thing men often did, especially the first time they met her, which told her how deadly earnest they were about dumping their load and getting on with their lives.

She glanced at the phone.

She glanced at her watch.

She hadn't gotten the professor's room number and suspected that if she called the main desk, they'd never put her through at this hour. Though he'd insisted he wasn't badly hurt, she knew the doctors wouldn't have kept him if he hadn't been seriously injured. Hospitals these days spit people out as fast as they took them in.

Would the professor be more upset if she opened it—or if she refused the delivery and it cost him a fortune to have it reshipped?

She sighed again, feeling damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

In the end it was the constantly-broke college student in her who flipped the coin and made the call.

"Fine. Let's do this. Open it up."

Twenty minutes later the deliverymen had secured her wearily scribbled signature and were gone, taking the remains of the crating with them.

And now she stood, eyeing the thing curiously. It wasn't a sarcophagus after all. In fact, most of the packaging had been padding.

From deep within layers and layers of cushioned wrapping, they'd unearthed a mirror and, at her direction, propped it carefully against the east wall of bookshelves.

Taller than she by more than a foot, the mirror's ornate frame was a shimmery gold. Shapes and symbols, of such uniformity and cohesion to imply a system of writing, were carved into every inch of the wide border. She narrowed her eyes, pondering the etchings, but linguistics was not her specialty, and the symbols were nothing that, without searching through books or notes, she could identify as a letter, word, or glyph.

Inside the gaudy gilt frame, the outer edges of the silvery glass were marred with a cloudy, uneven black stain of some sort, but aside from that, the glass itself was startlingly clear. She suspected it had been broken and replaced at some point and would ultimately prove centuries younger than the frame. No mirror of yore had achieved such clarity. Though the earliest artificial mirrors discovered by archaeologists dated back to 6200 B.C.E., they had been fashioned of polished obsidian, not glass. The first glass mirrors of significant size—roughly three-by-five-foot panels—hadn't been manufactured until the 1680's by Italian glassmaker Bernard Perroto for the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, commissioned by the extravagant Sun King, Louis the XIV. Exceptional glass mirrors of the size of the one before her—an impressive six and a half feet tall—generally proved to be a few hundred years old, at most.

Considering this one's pristine silvering, it was likely less than a century in age, and no one had gone mad or died from slow mercury poisoning making it. Hatmakers, or "hatters," hadn't been the only ones to suffer from the toxic fumes of their trade (though, for some reason Jessi'd never been able to figure, the idiom "mad-as-a-mirrormaker" had never quite caught on).

Eyes narrowed thoughtfully, she scrutinized it. The archaeologist in her itched to know the piece's provenance, wondered if the frame had been accurately dated.

She frowned. What did the professor want with a mirror, anyway? Such an item wasn't at all in keeping with his usual tastes, which ran toward replica weapons

and reproductions of ancient timepieces such as the sixteenth-century German astrolabe adorning his desk. And how could the professor possibly afford something worth “*boo-koo* bucks” on his teaching salary, anyway?

Fishing the key from the pocket of her jeans, she turned to leave. She’d done as he’d asked. Her work here was finished.

She flipped off the light and was just stepping through the doorway when she felt a chill. All the fine hair at the nape of her neck lifted, tingling as if electrified. Her heart was abruptly pounding against the wall of her chest, and she felt the sudden, terrifying certainty that she was being watched.

In the manner that prey was watched.

Flinching, she turned back toward the mirror.

Dimly illumed by the pale blue glow of the computer’s screen saver, the artifact looked positively eerie. The gold appeared silvery; the silver glass, smoky, dark and deep with shadows.

And in those shadows something *moved*.

She sucked in a breath so fast she choked on it. Sputtering, she groped for the light switch.

Overhead light blazed down, flooding the room.

She stared into the oblong glass, a hand pressed to her throat, swallowing convulsively.

Her reflection stared back.

After a moment, she closed her eyes. Snapped them open. Stared into the glass again.

Just her.

The hair at her nape continued to bristle, icy chills rippled up her spine. The pulse at the hollow of her neck fluttered frantically beneath her palm. Eyes wide, she glanced uneasily around the room.

The professor’s office, precisely as it should be.

After a long moment, she tried for a laugh but it came out shaky, uncertain, and seemed to echo unpleasantly in the office—as if the room’s square footage and actual occupiable space didn’t quite coincide.

“Jessi, you’re losing it,” she whispered.

There was nothing, no one with her in the professor’s office but her overactive imagination.

With a dismissive toss of her head, she turned, flipped off the light again, and this time pulled the door shut behind her hard and fast and without a backward glance.

Hurrying down the corridor, she dashed out into the back parking lot, kicking up a swirl of red and gold leaves as she hastened to her car.

The more distance she put between herself and the building, the more ridiculous she felt—really, getting all spooked alone on campus at night! One day she would be working on excavations in the middle of nowhere, quite likely late at night and sometimes alone. She couldn’t afford to be fanciful. At times, though, it was hard not to be, especially when holding a twenty-five-hundred-year-old Druid brooch, or examining a fabulously detailed La Tène period sword. Certain relics seemed to carry lingering traces of energy, the residue of the passionate lives of those who’d touched them.

Though not *anything* like what she thought she’d just seen.

“How weird was that?” she muttered, shaking off a lingering shiver. “God, I really *must* have sex on the brain.”

Watching the hottie and his girlfriend earlier had apparently done quite a number on her. That, coupled with exhaustion and the low lighting, she decided firmly as she unlocked her car and slipped behind the wheel, must have pushed her over the edge, into a brief, eyes-wide-open kind of hallucination/fantasy.

Because for a moment she actually thought she’d seen a half-naked man—an absolute sex-god of a man, no less—standing in Keene’s office, looking back at her.

A trick of the light, strange shadows falling, nothing more.

A towering, muscle-ripped, darkly beautiful man, dripping power. And hunger.

And sex. The kind of sex nice girls didn't have.

Oh, honey, you so need to get a boyfriend!

Looking at her like she was Little Red Riding Hood and the big, bad wolf hadn't been fed in a long, long time.

Definitely a trick of the light.

Looking at her from *inside* the mirror.

In a place that was not a place, yet was place enough to serve as an inescapable fortress prison, a place to terrify, to drive the common man stark raving mad, six feet five inches of caged ninth-century Highlander stirred.

A hungry animal sound rumbled deep in his throat.

Just as he'd thought: He smelled *woman*.

2

A FEW DAYS LATER . . .

When next Jessi unlocked the professor's office—late on Monday night—a distant part of her brain noted something askew, some tiny niggling detail, but she failed to process it, as she was currently the guest of honor at her own festive and highly enthusiastic pity-party.

That she turned the key, and back again, actually locking *then* unlocking the door, eluded her utterly.

Had she not been busy muttering beneath her breath about the depressingly huge stack of freshman papers that had been dumped on her in the professor's absence, that she might have actually gotten time to work on grading if he hadn't left her a message last night with a list a mile long of periodicals and sources he wanted her to collect from a dozen different places and bring to the hospital so

he could flag notes for the book he was writing while laid up recuperating, she might have been cognizant enough of her surroundings to have reconsidered walking through the door.

Maybe closed it again, locked it for real, and gone and gotten campus security.

Unfortunately, enthused celebrant of her own misery, she didn't notice a thing.

She paused with the door slightly ajar, puffed a few strands of hair from her face, and shifted the crammed-full backpack on her shoulder so her textbooks would stop gouging the back of her ribs.

"A hundred and eleven essays? Would somebody just shoot me and put me out of my misery?" She'd counted them in disbelief when Mark Trudeau, smirking openly, had handed them over. There went any hope of sleeping for the next few days.

Hey, I agreed to teach Keene's classes, Jess, and you know how tight my schedule is. He said you would grade.

She knew exactly why Keene had said she would grade. Because, no doubt, Mark had called him over the weekend and "suggested" she grade. Mark had been a shit to her ever since last year, when he'd hit on her (unsuccessfully) at the department Christmas party. She couldn't stand men who talked to her breasts, as if there was nothing above them worth noting, and he was one of the worst. She didn't go around talking to men's crotches.

Sure enough, the professor had left her *another* message while she was in class, bringing his total in the past twenty-four hours to five (would somebody please either take that man's phone away or knock him out with sedatives?), and thanked her for being "*such a lovely assistant and helping out. Mark really does have his hands full, and I told him you would be happy to assist.*"

Right. As if anyone had given her a choice. And as if Mark's hands were any more full than hers. But the world of academia was, like the rest of the world in many ways, still an Old Boys' School, and anytime Jessi began to forget that, life invariably gave her a refresher course.

Nudging the door open with her hip, Jessi pushed inside, leaving it ajar. Skirting the desk, she headed straight for the wall of bookshelves. She didn't bother turning on the light, partly because she'd organized the office herself and knew

exactly where to find the two books on Celtic Gaul that Professor Keene wanted, and partly because she was determined not to get distracted by the mirror, and the slow, relentless burn of questions it had ignited in her mind.

She'd made peace with that weird little trick of the eye she'd suffered on Friday—a product of nothing more than low light and exhaustion. But she was dying to know if the mirror was a genuine relic. How had the professor come across it? Was its origin provable? Had any valid dating been done? What *were* those symbols, anyway?

Jessi had a sticky memory—a useful ability in her field—and several of the symbols had gotten embedded in it from her single, cursory inspection. She'd been subconsciously pondering them since, wondering why they seemed so familiar, yet somehow . . . wrong. Trying to pinpoint where she'd seen something similar before. Her specialty was the archaeology of Europe from the Paleolithic to the “Celtic” Iron Age. Though the mirror was clearly of recent manufacture, she was titillated by the possibility that the frame might actually date to somewhere in the late Iron Age.

She knew herself well enough to know that if she took another look at the relic tonight, curiosity would get the best of her and the next thing, she'd be digging through the professor's reference books trying to determine what the symbols were and doing her best to guesstimate a date. *Been there, done that*, she thought wryly. Blew an entire night without even realizing it, poring over one artifact or another, especially on those rare and glorious occasions the university was briefly entrusted with a collector's piece for study or verification. She always paid for it double the next day. With that infernal stack of papers waiting for her, she couldn't afford to waste any time. In and out, swift and efficient, was her plan and she was sticking to it.

She was just reaching up to pluck the two thick volumes from the shelf when she heard the soft *snick* of the door closing behind her.

She stiffened, froze midreach.

Then snorted and pulled the first book from the shelf. A draft. Nothing more. “No way. I am *not* getting all freaked out on campus again tonight. That blasted mirror is *just* a mirror,” she told the bookcase firmly.

“Actually, it's not,” a smooth, faintly accented voice murmured behind her. “It's far more than a mere mirror. Who else knows it's here?”

Jessi gasped and turned around so fast that the book went flying from her hand, hit the wall with a solid *whump*, and slid to the floor. She winced. The professor was going to kill her if she'd spindled the spine; he was funny about his books, especially his hardbacks. Across the office, in the dim light afforded by the computer, she could just make out the silhouette of a man leaning back against the door, arms folded across his chest.

"Wh-what—wh-who—" she stammered.

Light flooded the room.

"I startled you," the man said softly, dropping his hand from the wall switch.

Later Jessi would realize he'd merely noted a fact, not apologized.

She blinked against the abrupt increase in wattage, taking him in. His arms were crossed again; he leaned casually against the door. Tall and well built, he was extremely attractive. Longish blond hair was pulled back from a clean-shaven, classic face. He wore a dark, expensive tailored suit, a crisp shirt, a tasteful tie. His accent held distinct Slavic undertones, perhaps Russian, she mused. A young professor visiting from abroad? A speaker engaged by the university? "I didn't realize anyone else was still in this wing," she said. "Are you looking for Professor Keene?"

"The professor and I have already had our time together this evening," he replied with the ghost of a smile.

An odd way of phrasing things; his comment passed through her mind absently, as she was still hung up on his opening gambit. She pounced on it, pursuing it eagerly: "What did you mean, 'it's far more than a mere mirror'? What do you know about it? Where is it from? Are you here to authenticate it? Or has it already been? What are the symbols? Do you know?"

He stepped away from the door, moved deeper into the room. "I understand it was delivered this past Friday. Has anyone else seen it?"

Jessi thought a moment, shook her head. "I don't think so. The deliverymen opened it up, but other than that, just me. Why?"

He glanced around the office. "There's been no cleaning crew in since then? No other persons such as yourself with a key?"

Jessi frowned, perplexed by the direction of his questions. And getting irked that he wasn't answering any of hers. "No. The cleaners come on Wednesdays and the only reason I have a key is because I'm Professor Keene's assistant."

"I see." He eased forward another step.

And that was when Jessi felt it.

Menace. Rolling off him. She'd not picked up on it right away, disarmed by his good looks, curious about the artifact, peripherally distracted by her own brooding. But it was there—a wolf beneath the sheep's clothing. For all his seeming civility, there was something cold and dangerous beneath that elegant suit. And it was focused on her.

Why? It didn't make any sense!

And suddenly the tiny niggling detail that had eluded her when she'd turned the key in the door swam up from the murky waters of her subconscious: It had already been unlocked! He must have been inside the office, concealing himself behind the door when she'd pushed it open!

Keep him talking, she thought, fighting panic. She drew a careful, deep breath. Adrenaline was kicking in, upping her heart rate, making her hands and legs feel shaky. She concentrated on betraying no sign of her belated recognition of danger. Surprise might be the only advantage she had. Somewhere in the office was something she could use as a weapon, something more threatening than a book. She just had to get her hands on it before he figured out she was on to him. She snatched a surreptitious glance to her right.

Yes! Just as she'd thought, there lay one of the professor's replica blades on a nearby curio table. Though a reproduction piece, fashioned of steel not gem-encrusted gold, it was every bit as lethal as the real thing.

"So how old is the mirror, anyway?" she asked, donning her best wide-eyed, I'm-not-the-brightest-bulb-in-the-box look.

He moved again. Smooth, like a well-muscled animal. A few more steps and he'd be past the desk. She eased right a tad.

It seemed he was pondering whether or not to answer her for a moment, then he shrugged. "You would probably place it in the Old Stone Age."

Jessi sucked in a breath and for just a moment, the briefest of instants, fear fell by the wayside. The Old Stone Age? Was he *kidding*?

Wait—of course he was. He had to be! It was patently impossible. The earliest forms of writing, cuneiform and hieroglyphics, weren't even in existence until the mid to end of the fourth century B.C.E.! And those etchings on the mirror were *some* kind of writing.

“Ha, ha. I'm not that stupid.” Well, today, she ceded dismally, she certainly seemed to be, on just about all fronts, but normally she wasn't. Normally she suffered only one or two stupid fronts, not this all-encompassing, blanket idiocy. “That would put it at pre-ten-thousand B.C.E.,” she scoffed, as she stole a few more inches. Had he noticed what she was doing? If so, he was giving no indication.

“Yes, indeed it would. Considerably ‘pre.’ ” He took another step forward.

She considered screaming but she was nearly certain there was no one else in the south wing this late at night, and suspected it would be wiser to conserve her energy to defend herself with. “Okay, I'll go with this a minute,” she said, inching, inching. *Just a little farther. Keep him talking.* Dare she make a leap for it? “You're claiming the frame is from the Old Stone Age. Right? And the carvings were added later, and the mirror inserted in the last century or so.”

“No. The entire piece, in sum, Old Stone Age.”

Her jaw dropped. She snapped her mouth closed, but it fell open again. She searched his face, detected no sign of jest. “Impossible! Symbols aside, that's a *glass* mirror!”

He laughed softly. “Not . . . quite. Nothing about an Unseelie piece is ever . . . quite what it seems.”

“ ‘An Unseelie piece’?” she echoed blankly. “I'm not familiar with that classification.” Her fingers curled, she braced herself to dive for the blade, doing a mental five-count . . . *four* . . . *three* . . .

“Not many are. It denotes relics few ever see and live to tell of. Ancient Hallows fashioned by those darkest among the Tuatha Dé Danaan.” He paused the space of a heartbeat. “Don't worry, Jessica St. James—”

Oh, God, he knew her name. How did he know her name?

“—I’ll make it quick. You’ll hardly feel a thing.” His smile was terrifyingly gentle.

“Holy *shit*!” She lunged for the dirk at the same moment he lunged for her.

When one was afraid for one’s life, Jessi observed with almost serene, dreamlike detachment, events had a funny way of slowing down, even though one knew events were really rushing toward one with all the velocity and surety of a high-speed train wreck.

She noted every detail of his lunge, as if it unfolded in freeze-frames: his legs bent, his body drew in on itself, coiling to spring, one hand dipped into a pocket, withdrew a thin wire with leather-wrapped ends, his eyes went cold, his face hard, she even noticed the whitening around the edges of his nostrils as they flared with a terrifying, incongruous sexual excitement.

She was aware of her own body in a similar dichotomous fashion. Though her heart thundered and her breath came in fast and furious gasps, her legs felt made of lead, and the few steps she managed seemed to take a lifetime.

His lips curled mockingly and, in that sharp-edged smile, she saw the sudden stark certainty that even if she managed to arm herself with the small blade, it wouldn’t matter. Death waited in his smile. He’d done this before. Many, many times. And he was good at it. She had no idea how she knew, she just knew.

As he closed in on her, wrapping the leather-cased ends of the wire around his hands, the silvery glint of the minor, leaning against the bookshelves beyond the table, caught her eye.

Of course—the mirror!

She might not be able to best him in a physical struggle, but she just happened to be smack between him and what he wanted!

And what he wanted was *highly* breakable.

She practically fell on top of the curio table, shoved aside the dirk, and closed her hand instead around the heavy pewter base of the lamp next to it. She

whirled to face him at dizzying speed, backed up against the mirror, and hefted the lamp like a baseball bat. “Stop right there!”

He stopped so abruptly that he should have fallen flat on his face, which spoke volumes about how much lethal muscle was under that suit—oh yes, she’d be dead if he got his hands on her.

“Take one more step and I’ll smash the mirror to smithereens.” She brandished the lamp threateningly.

Was that the sound of a sharply indrawn breath *behind* her? Followed by a muttered curse?

Impossible!

She dare not turn. Dare not take her eyes off her attacker for even a moment. Dare not give in to the sob of fear that was trying to claw its way up the back of her throat.

His gaze darted over her shoulder, his eyes flared, then his gaze latched back on her. “No, you won’t. You preserve history. You don’t destroy it. That thing is priceless. And it *is* as old as I said it was. It is conceivably the single most important relic any archaeologist has ever laid eyes on. It debunks thousands of years of your so-called ‘history.’ Think of the impact it could have on your world.”

“Mine personally? Gee, like, uh, *none*, if I’m dead. Back off, mister, if you want it in one piece. And I think you do. I think it’s not worth a thing to you broken.” If he was going to kill her, she had nothing to lose by smashing it into a gazillion silvery little pieces; no matter that her inner historian violently protested such sacrilege. If she was going down, she was taking whatever he wanted with her. If she was going to be dead, by God, he was going to be miserable too.

A muscle worked in his jaw. His gaze skidded between her and the mirror and back again. He tensed as if to take a step.

“Don’t do it,” she warned. “I’m serious.” She shifted her grip on the lamp, prepared to swing it into the mirror if he so much as breathed wrong. If nothing else, maybe they’d struggle atop the shards of glass; he’d slip, cut himself, and bleed to death. One never knew.

“Impasse,” he murmured. “Interesting. You’ve more spirit than I’d thought.”

“If you are wishing to live, lass,” came the deep, rich purr of a brogue behind her, “best summon me out now.”

A chill shuddered through her entire body, and the baby-fine hair at the nape of her neck stood up, quivering on end. Just like on Friday, the room felt suddenly . . . wrong. Not quite the size and shape it was supposed to be. As if a door that by all conventions of reality couldn’t possibly be there had suddenly opened, skewing the known dimensions of her world.

“Shut the hell up,” her assailant clipped, his gaze fixed over her shoulder, “or I’ll smash you myself.”

Dark, mocking laughter rolled behind her. It made her shiver. “You wouldn’t dare and well you ken it. ’Tis why you’ve not rushed her. Lucan sent you with precise instructions. Bring it back intact, nay? The mere possibility that the mirror might be shattered makes your blood ice. You know what he’d do to you. You’d be begging for death.”

“Huh-uh, no way,” Jessi whispered, eyes going wide. She could feel the blood draining from her face, knew she’d gone white as snow. “Not believing this.” She took a shaky little breath. “Any of this.”

Logic insisted there couldn’t possibly be anyone behind her. And certainly not anyone *inside a mirror*; for heaven’s sake!

But her gut was of a different opinion.

Her gut sensed “Man” with a capital “M” behind her, and he was throwing off all the heat of a small, fiery forge at her back. Enough that it made the sides and front of her feel abruptly cold. Made her neck ache with the effort of keeping her gaze fixed firmly on her would-be murderer, and not turning to gape at the looking glass. She could *feel* him behind her. Something. Someone. Caged power. Caged sexuality. Whatever was behind her was formidable.

“Doona turn, woman,” he—it—whatever it was—counseled. “Keep your eyes on him and speak after me—”

“I’d advise against that,” the blond man warned, locking gazes with her. “You’ve no idea what you’d be letting out of that mirror.”

Jessi took another shallow breath. She could sense the blond man's tightly leashed fury, knew if he thought, for even a split second, that she might not actually break the mirror, she was dead. She was afraid to so much as blink, afraid he would lunge during that brief moment of vulnerability. And there was something behind her that couldn't possibly be there, at least not according to any laws of physics *she* understood. Admittedly, there were many laws of physics she didn't understand, but she felt confident enough of those she did to protest faintly, "This is crazy."

" 'Crazy' would be letting him out," the blond man said. "Step away from the mirror. Do as I say and I'll see to it he doesn't harm you."

"Oh, like I'm believing that. Now you're my *protector*?"

"Summon me out, woman. *I* am your protector," came the command at her back.

"This isn't happening." It couldn't be. None of it. Her mind was incapable of processing it, and the sensation of dreamlike detachment was increasing exponentially. She felt as if she were standing, bewildered, on a stage set, as actors played their parts around her, and if somebody had a playbill with one of those helpful little plot synopsis thingies, she sure hadn't gotten to see it.

"He *will* kill you, lass," rolled the deep Scots burr behind her, "and you know it. You doona ken the same of me. Sure death or a mayhap death, 'tis a simple choice."

"And that's supposed to be reassuring?" she snapped over her shoulder, to whatever it was that was there that couldn't really be there.

The blond man smiled coldly. "Oh, he'll kill you, and far more brutally than I. Step aside and I'll let you live. I'll collect the mirror and leave. I give you my word."

Jessi shook her head from side to side, once. "Leave. Now. And I won't smash the mirror."

"He won't leave, lass, 'til you're dead. He cannot. He is bound to serve one who would punish him were he to leave you alive now that you've seen the Dark Glass. I've no means to convince you to trust me. You must hang your bonnet on faith. Him. Or me. Choose. Now."

“He was imprisoned in such a fashion because he is a ruthless killer that couldn’t be contained any other way. He was locked away for the safety of the world. It took the power of formidable Druids—”

“Woman, choose! Repeat this: *Lialth bree che bree, Cian MacKeltar, drachme se-sidh!*”

Jessi echoed the strange words without missing a beat the moment she heard them.

Because she finally understood what was going on.

She was right—none of this was happening.

What was happening was that she’d let herself in Professor Keene’s office and, rather than going to the bookshelf as she’d thought, she’d sat down for a moment on the plush leather Chesterfield sofa to rest her eyes. But she’d ended up getting too horizontal. And she was currently snoozing soundly away, having the most bizarre of dreams.

And everyone knew nothing mattered in dreams. One always woke up. Always. So why not let the man out of the mirror? Who cared?

She echoed the odd incantation twice, for good measure. Brilliant golden light flashed, the heat behind her increased markedly, and the room suddenly seemed too small for all that was in it. The sensation of spatial distortion increased almost unbearably.

The lamp was plucked from her limp grasp and placed elsewhere. Strong hands closed on her waist from behind. Lifted her from the floor and swept her aside. Deposited her behind him, sheltering her with his body.

She caught scent of him then—God, had she ever smelled such a scent? The female muscles deep in her lower belly clenched. He bore no chemical traces of aftershave or deodorant. Nothing artificial. Just pure man: a blend of sun-warmed leather on skin, a kiss of something spicy like clove, a touch of sweat, and the raw, unspoken promise of sex. If male sexual dominion had a scent, he reeked of it, and it worked on her like the ultimate pheromone, bringing her nipples and groin to intense, painful sexual awareness.

She glanced up. And up.

It was the same towering, gorgeous, muscle-ripped man from her Friday-night fantasy, his long dark hair a tangle of dozens of braids bound with gold, silver, and copper beads, falling halfway down his back. His bare, oh-so-beautiful, velvet-skinned back.

“*Whuh,*” she breathed. In all her voyeuristic forays, she’d never seen a man so savagely, splendidly masculine. Figured he existed only in her subconscious.

It occurred to her then that since it *was* her subconscious at work, it was high time she transformed her id’s twisted little everyone’s-trying-to-kill-Jessi-today dream into something more to her liking: one toe-curling, scorchingly hot sex-dream.

Usually even the most intractable of bad dreams needed only a tiny nudge.

Nudge she would. With this fantasy man? Happily. Blissfully, even. She slid her palms up that perfect, powerful back, gliding over the ridges of muscle.

Fisted her hands in all that magnificent dark hair. Rubbed up against him, molding herself like Saran Wrap to his muscular, deliciously tight ass.

And licked him.

Slipped her tongue right up his spine. Tasted the salt and man and heat of him.

His entire body jerked with a violence that she would have found frightening, were she awake and any of it real. He sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth, a long, tight indrawn hiss, as if he were in exquisite pain. He went completely still, and made a guttural sound deep in his throat.

“You try me, woman,” he hissed.

He tossed his head—hard—yanking his braids free of her hands. In two strides he was through the door, slamming it behind him.

Only then did Jessi realize her assailant, too, was gone. He must have fled the moment she’d freed the man from the mirror.

With a gusty sigh, she went and slumped down on the couch. After a moment, she lay down, stretched out, and folded her arms behind her head.

She crossed her legs. Uncrossed them. Rubbed her eyes. Pinched herself

experimentally a time or two.

God, she was horny. She couldn't remember ever being so horny. The instant she'd pressed up against him she'd felt the strangest . . . well . . . *jolt*, for lack of a better word, sizzle through her entire body, and she'd gotten instantly ready. Panties-slick, ready-for-sex, no-foreplay-necessary ready.

So this is a wet dream, she thought with a little snort of amusement.

A worrisomely vivid, detailed wet dream, but a dream nonetheless.

She was going to wake up any minute now.

Yup. Any minute now.

Jessi awakened stiff, cold, and with the beginnings of what promised to be a perfectly vicious headache.

Her neck was crinked from sleeping funny and she must have pushed her pillow off the bed in the middle of the night, because there was nothing remotely downy beneath her head. She opened her eyes and pushed herself up, intending to take some Advil, retrieve her pillow, and lie back down for a few minutes, but the moment she opened her eyes, she had to add utterly-perplexed-as-to-her-current-location-in-the-universe to her list of complaints.

Unfortunately, her cranky, sleep-muddled respite from reality was far too brief. As soon as she sat up, she discovered she was not in her bed as she'd thought, but on the sofa in Professor Keene's office, and the events of last night sledgehammered back into her brain.

Groaning, she dropped her head forward and clutched it with both hands.

Impossible events: a stranger in the office who'd tried to kill her; an absurd tale that the mirror was Old Stone Age; a man inside the mirror whom she'd freed—allegedly a ruthless killer.

Insane events.

Face buried in her palms, she whimpered, "What's *happening* to me?"

But she knew what was happening to her; it was painfully obvious. She was losing it, that was what. And she wouldn't be the first graduate student to crack under the strain of an overly ambitious load. Hardly a term passed without one or two dropping out of the program. The survivors always shook their heads and gossiped mercilessly about how so-and-so "just couldn't take the pressure." She knew; she'd been among them.

But I can take the pressure! I'm doing great; look at my GPA! she protested

inwardly.

Right. Uh-huh, logic countered flatly, so what other explanation is there for the crazy hallucinations—or dreams—or whatever they are—that you’ve been suffering for the past few days?

She sighed. There was no denying it; in the past few days she’d had two distinct bouts of . . . well, something . . . during which she’d not only been incapable of distinguishing reality from fantasy, she’d not even been in charge of her own fantasy.

Which hardly seemed fair, she thought, biting back a bubble of near-hysterical laughter. If a girl was going to lose her mind, shouldn’t she at least get to enjoy it? Why on earth would she conjure the perfect male specimen, the most incendiary of hotties, then make herself the hapless victim of some bizarre murder plot?

“I just don’t get it.” Gingerly, she rubbed the pads of her index fingers in small circles on her throbbing temples.

Unless it had actually *happened*.

“Right. Uh-huh.” A man in a mirror. Sure.

Still holding her temples, she raised her head, peering about the dimly lit office, seeking clues. There was no indication that anyone but she had ever been there. Oh, the lamp was on the floor, rather than in its usual perch on the table, and a book was lying on the rug near the wall, but neither of those things could be construed as conclusive evidence that someone else had been in the office with her last night. People were known to sleepwalk in the midst of highly vivid dreams.

She forced herself to look in the mirror. Directly into it.

Hard silvered glass. Nothing more.

Forced herself to stand up. Walk over to it. Place her cold palms against the colder glass.

Hard silvered glass. Nothing more. No way anything had come out of that.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned her back on the relic.

Moving stiffly, she retrieved her backpack from the floor, scooped up the books the professor wanted, stuffed them into her bag, let herself out, and locked up the office.

For the first time in the entire history of her academic career, Jessi did the unthinkable: She ditched classes, went home, took some aspirin, tugged on her favorite *Godsmack* T-shirt, crawled into bed, pulled the covers up over her head.

And hid.

She never gave up. Never abandoned her plans and schedule. Never failed to meet things head-on. As tight as her schedule was, if she let a single thing slip or fall behind, a dozen others were affected. One tiny lapse could initiate a wildly entropic downward spiral. Ergo, everything had to be tackled and completed as planned.

Last winter, she'd trudged to class in the middle of one of Chicago's most brutal snowstorms, trembling from head to toe with violent flu-chills, so sick that all the millions of tiny pores in her skin stung like little needle pricks. She'd lectured on more than one occasion while bordering on laryngitis, forcing her voice only with the aid of a disgustingly vile tea of orange peel, olive oil, and varied unmentionables she still shuddered to think about. She'd graded papers with a fever of a hundred and two.

But craziness wasn't something one could tackle and complete, moving on to the next project.

And she had no clue how to deal with it.

Figuring chocolate was a start, as soon as she stepped through the door of her apartment, she grabbed a bag of Hershey's Kisses she kept stashed away for emergencies (i.e., bad hair, severe PMS, or just one of those good old men-are-stupid-and-suck days) and in her warm cocoon beneath the blankets, began making short work of the decadent, melty little morsels.

After devouring the entire bag, she fell asleep.

She slept straight through until nine o'clock that night.

Upon awakening, she felt so much better that it occurred to her perhaps all she'd

really needed was a good, solid ten hours of uninterrupted sleep. That perhaps, now that she was getting older—after all, she wasn't a freshman anymore, she was twenty-four years old!—her frequent all-nighters exacted more of a toll than they used to. That perhaps she should start taking vitamins. Drink more milk. Eat her vegetables.

She wasn't crazy, she thought, shaking her head and smiling faintly at the sheer absurdity of the notion. Those two intensely vivid dream/hallucinations she'd suffered had been merely an isolated occurrence of stress coupled with lack of sleep, and she was making a big deal out of nothing.

"I was just exhausted," she told herself with a perfunctory, optimistic little nod.

Chocolate and sleep had buoyed her spirits. Fortified her to begin anew.

She was ready to start all over again, to face the day, or night, as it may be, and prove to herself that there was nothing wrong with her.

At least that was how she felt *before* she turned on the TV.

Vengeance.

'Twas the possibility that had kept Cian MacKeltar from going stark raving mad during the past 1,133 years of his incarceration in the Dark Glass.

From without, the glass looked to be little more than an elaborate mirror. From within, it was a circular stone prison, fifteen paces across at any point one chose to walk it. And he'd walked it a lot. Counted every bloody stone. Stone floor. Stones walls. Stone ceiling. Gray. Drab. Cold.

He'd stayed heated over the centuries by one thought only, burning like liquid fire in his veins.

Vengeance.

He'd lived it, breathed it, *become* it, caged and waiting, ever since the day Lucan Myrddin Trevayne, a man he'd once counted his closest friend and boon companion in the arts, had bound him to the Dark Glass, thereby securing immortality for himself.

Given the extent of the binding spells Lucan had used on him—coupled with his powerlessness within the glass and his inability to exit it, unless granted a brief freedom by the chanting of a summoning spell by someone beyond it—some might have dismissed his hope for vengeance as an impossibility.

But being a Druid, and a Keltar at that, Cian understood things that seemed impossible rarely were.

What impossible truly meant was “hasn’t happened *yet*.”

A fact that had been demonstrated well enough when, three and a half months ago, a thief had broken into Trevayne’s London stronghold—an impossibility in itself—and carted off half the bastard’s most prized relics, including the Dark Glass, scant months before the tithe that bound Cian to the Hallow was due.

Chance had favored him at long last. Lucan had lost possession of the mirror just when he needed it the most.

Now it was the tenth day of the tenth month, and Cian need only stay out of Lucan’s hands for a mere twenty-two more days—until just after midnight on All Hallows’ Eve, the anniversary of his original binding—in order to satisfy his millennium-old lust for vengeance. And bloody hell, he was starved for it!

Now that Lucan had a solid lead on the Dark Book, the most dangerous of all the Unseelie Hallows, it was even more critical Cian shatter the cursed Compact imprisoning him. Fulcrum for some of the deadliest black magyk known to man, the Dark Book in the hands of any man was a recipe for cataclysmic destruction. In the hands of Lucan “Merlin” Trevayne, it could brew the end of the world as the world knew it. Lucan could rewrite history, change time itself, if he managed to decipher some of the intricate spells therein. Cian *had* to stop him from getting the book. He had to defeat his ancient enemy once and for all.

He’d thought success within his grasp, had believed, given how many hands the Dark Glass had been passed through, and how far it had been sent, that Lucan would never find it in time, but yesterday had illustrated otherwise. He’d indeed been found, and his time had run out.

He’d recognized the Russian assassin the moment he’d slipped into the office last eve. He’d glimpsed him several times in the past when Roman had visited Trevayne’s London residence, where Cian had hung high on a wall in Lucan’s private study, being taunted by a view out a wall of windows that overlooked a

busy London street in a world in which he would never live again.

At least he'd had a view. Had Lucan hung him *toward* the wall, he wasn't certain even lust for vengeance would have kept him sane. Nor would it have afforded him the opportunity to test the mirror when his gaoler was away and learn to summon in inert objects that were within his line of vision. In such a fashion, he'd kept up with time's fierce trot forward, devouring every book, periodical, and newspaper that passed through Lucan's study over the centuries, occasionally even seeing a bit of television, while his view beyond the window metamorphosed from a sweetly rolling meadow to a small town, and finally to a sophisticated, bustling city.

Much like this "Chicago" in which he'd walked last eve.

Free, sweet Christ, he'd walked free again for a time! He'd felt the crush of grass beneath his boots, savored the wind in his face!

There were days inside the mirror when he felt he might willingly cut off his right arm for a single deep breath of a peat fire heaped with sheaves of fragrant heather, or a few lungfuls of briny air on Scotia's wild shore. Or to sprawl on his back atop a high ben, as close to the heavens as one could get only in the Highlands, and watch the gloaming take the sky, streak and smudge it with violet and crimson, then turn it to a black velvet canopy sprinkled with starry diamonds.

He'd not seen his beloved Scotia in eleven hundred and thirty-three years. That was hell right there for a Highlander, to live exiled from his motherland.

Though Lucan had occasionally granted him freedoms in exchange for aid with a particularly difficult spell or a dark deed he wanted done—the bastard had stayed on intricately warded ground the entire time, so Cian couldn't touch him—the last had been over a hundred and twenty years ago, and such freedoms were agonizingly brief. The Dark Glass's magic always reclaimed him after a time, despite his resistance. It didn't matter how fast or far from it he fled, didn't matter what Druid wards he wove about himself, after a time—and it was never the same interval; once, an entire day; another time, no more than a single hour—he was simply no longer wherever he'd been: one moment free; the next, back in his prison.

It had taken him some time last night to track Roman and, because he'd been concerned the mirror might reclaim him before he'd succeeded, he'd focused

single-mindedly on the task. He had no doubt another of Lucan's men would soon be coming. And another and another, *ad infinitum*, until the mirror had been collected and all trace of any who'd so much as glimpsed it, eradicated.

It was the way of men of their ilk—men of magycks, light and dark, those who practiced *draiodheacht*—to conceal such things as the Hallows from the world. Cian—because common man should not be troubled by the existence of such things. Lucan—because there were many other sorcerers out there (scrupulously staying off one another's radar) who would stop at nothing to steal the coveted, dangerous Dark Hallows, were they to learn he had them. Contrary to what many thought, sorcerers and witches were a flourishing breed.

A Keltar Druid would have worked a complex memory spell to harmlessly—if properly and painstakingly done—erase the forbidden knowledge from the minds of any who'd encountered it.

But not Lucan. Simpler to kill: minimum effort, maximum pleasure and gain. Lucan thrived on power over life and death. He always had.

Cian smiled bitterly. Anyone in his path was expendable, and the woman was in his path. She was in mortal danger that she couldn't possibly begin to fathom or hope to survive.

His thoughts both gentled and grew fiercer as they turned toward her. Fiery, determined, courageous, she was a stunning woman, with short glossy black hair curling softly back from a heart-shaped, delicate-featured face, and the most perfect, bountiful, lusciously rounded breasts he'd ever seen. A delectable ass too. He'd seen in great detail each intimate curve in her low-slung blue jeans and snug peach sweater. He'd even glimpsed part of her panties—which couldn't have covered more than a fraction of her generous bottom, fashioned as they were from little more than ribbons—peeking up from the waistband of her jeans. The orange lacy stuff had been adorned by a bright pink butterfly at the base of her spine, making it seem her panties had been designed to slide up from her jeans to taunt a man's eye. *Men must be paragons of restraint in this century*, he'd thought, staring fixedly at the scrap of frothy fabric rising from between the twin globes of her ass, *or a bunch of bloody eunuchs*. Creamy sun-kissed skin, eyes of jade, mouth of a temptress, Lucan's assassin had called her Jessica.

As Cian had anticipated, she'd endeavored to convince herself that none of last eve had happened. On those infrequent occasions he'd been glimpsed by the

uninitiated, they blamed everything and anything to deny the possibility of his existence.

He, on the other hand, would replay over and over a single moment from last eve, convincing himself it had indeed happened.

She'd rubbed up against him and tasted him. Crushed those round, heavy breasts to his back, nipples hard and poking him through the fabric of her woolen, and *licked* him.

As if she'd hungered for the salt of his skin on her tongue.

His cock had shot up so painfully erect that his balls had jerked and his seed had nearly exploded out of him right then and there.

The feel of her against his body had caused a thing he'd never before experienced: a violent jolt that had speared straight to the core of his soul. It had been all he could do to force her hands from his hair and pull away. It had taken every ounce of his will to not simply turn on her, drop her to the floor, and spread her for his pleasure. Forget about her assailant entirely. Bury himself inside her and stay there until torn from her body by Dark Magyck.

But nay, not only wouldn't he let her life be snuffed like some frail candle flame caught in a deadly tempest not of her own making—he needed her.

“Twenty-two days,” he murmured. After more than a millennium of biding time, his vengeance was now dependant upon a laughably finite number of days.

Jessica St. James didn't know it yet, but she was going to help him get them.

If not willingly, then by means of every Dark Art he knew.

And he knew a lot of them.

Had practiced most of them. And excelled at all of them.

Lucan wasn't the only one who'd wanted the Dark Glass.

CASTLE KELTAR—SCOTLAND

“You’ll ne’er believe this, Drustan,” Dageus MacKeltar said, glancing up as his twin brother, elder by three minutes, strolled into the library at Castle Keltar.

“I doona think much would surprise me after all we’ve seen, brother, but try me,” Drustan said dryly. He crossed to a handsome mahogany serving bar, artfully crafted into a section of bookshelves, and poured himself a tumbler of Macallan, fine, aged, single-malt scotch.

Dageus flipped through a few more pages of the scuffed leather tome he held, then placed it aside and stretched out his legs, folding his hands behind his head. Beyond tall velvet-draped windows, violet smudged a cobalt sky and he paused a moment, savoring the beauty of yet another Highland gloaming. Then, “You know how we’ve ever thought Cian MacKeltar naught more than a myth?”

“Aye,” Drustan replied, moving to join him near the fire. “The legendary and terrible Cian: the only Keltar ancestor to ever willingly cross over to the Dark Arts—”

“Not quite true, brother. So did I,” Dageus corrected softly.

Drustan stiffened. “Nay, you acted out of love; ’twas a vastly different thing. This Cian—who, like as not, is pure fable crafted to reinforce our adherence to our oaths—did so out of unquenchable lust for power.”

“Mayhap. Mayhap not.” Cynicism shaped the edges of Dageus’s smile. “I would place no wagers on what our progeny might say of *me* a thousand years hence.” He gestured to the tome. “ ’Tis one of Cian MacKeltar’s journals.”

Drustan stopped, halfway down into a chair, tumbler nearly to his lips. Silvery eyes, glittering with fascination, met his twin’s golden gaze. He lowered his glass, sank slowly into the chair. “Indeed?”

“Aye, though a great many pages have been torn out, the notations were made by one Cian MacKeltar, who lived in the mid–ninth century.”

“Is that the journal you said Da found in the hidden underground chamber library, last you went through the stones with Chloe to the sixteenth century?”

The hidden underground library was the long, narrow chamber hewn of stone that stretched deep beneath the castle, wherein the vast majority of Keltar lore and relics, including the gold Compact struck between Tuatha Dé Danaan and Man, were housed. It had been sealed up, the entrance concealed behind a hearth, more than a millennium ago.

Over time, the existence of the chamber had been completely forgotten. Vague tales that once the Keltar had possessed much more in the way of lore existed, but few believed and fewer still had searched for it, and those to no avail. It wasn’t until the castle housekeeper, Nell—who’d later wed their da, Silvan, and become their next-mother—had inadvertently triggered the opening mechanism while dusting one day, that it had been found again. Still, she’d said naught about it, believing Silvan knew, and would be upset if she had knowledge of his clan’s private doings. She would likely never have mentioned it to Silvan had Dageus not been in such desperate straits.

Their da had briefly opened that chamber in the sixteenth century, but had resealed it in hopes of not altering events that had already transpired between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries. Drustan had recently agreed to make it again accessible for future generations. Since reopening it, Dageus had been translating the most ancient of the scrolls therein, recopying the fragile documents, and learning much more about their ancient benefactors in the process. And now, about one of their ancient ancestors.

“Nay. That journal was but a record of recent events: handfastings, births, deaths. This journal deals with his studies into the Druid arts, much of it in cipher. ’Twas hidden beneath a cracked flagstone o’er which Chloe tripped. She suspects there may be more concealed about the chamber.”

Dageus’s wife, Chloe, an avid historian, had set her heart on systematically cataloging the contents of the underground repository and, as Dageus couldn’t bear to be parted from her for any length of time, he’d resigned himself to spending a great deal of time (meaning, probably until the very moment his lovely, pregnant wife was about to deliver) in the dusty, subterranean

compartment, hence the scribing task he'd assigned himself.

He smiled. Better a dank chamber with his cherished Chloe than the sunniest Highland vista without her. *Och*, he amended fiercely, *better Hell with Chloe than Heaven without her*. Such was the depth of his love for the woman whom he'd taken captive in his darkest hour, who'd pledged her heart to him despite his actions, despite the evil within him.

"So what does it tell us of this ancestor of ours?" Drustan said curiously, jarring him from his thoughts.

Dageus snorted, disgruntled. He'd hoped for much more, and planned to dig deeper in the chamber to see what else he could uncover about their epic ancestor. He believed an understanding of the past was necessary to ensure a bright future, that those who forgot the past were condemned to repeat it. "From the parts I've managed to decipher, little more than that he was, in truth, a man, not a fable, and that the chamber was not forgotten but deliberately hidden from us. Da believed there'd been a battle or illness that had taken many lives abruptly, including all those who knew of the chamber. But 'twas not the case. The final entry in the journal is not his, but a warning about the use of magycks. Whoever made the entry also made the decision to seal the chamber, altering the rooms above to forever conceal it."

"Indeed?" Drustan's brows rose.

"Aye. So many pages have been torn out, I doona ken what Cian MacKeltar did that was so terrible, or what became his fate, but the last entry makes it plain that the chamber was secreted away because of him."

"Hmm," Drustan mused, sipping his scotch. "It makes one wonder what a man might have done to cause such drastic measures to be taken—the separating of all future generations of Keltar from the bulk of our knowledge and power. 'Twas no small thing to divide us from our heritage."

"Aye," Dageus said thoughtfully, "indeed, it does make one wonder."

"Can you frigging believe it, man? Somebody broke the guy's neck and left him there on the commons, dead as a doornail!"

“Great. That’s just what we need. More crime. The university’ll use it as another excuse to put the screws to us and raise tuition again.”

Jessi shook her head, pushed her way through the group of undergrads loitering at the coffee bar. As she placed her order, she wondered if she’d ever been so young, or so faux-jaded. She hoped not.

Campus was abuzz with gossip. The police had released few details, so everyone was pretending to know something. Funny thing was, she really *did* know something about the blond, well-dressed “John Doe” found dead on the campus commons yesterday, and she was the only one *not* talking.

And she wasn’t about to.

When she’d flipped on the TV last night, only to discover the local news featuring a story on the murder of one of the two men she’d spent most of the day convincing herself weren’t real, she’d sat, stunned, staring blankly at the screen long after the segment had ended.

The police were investigating the blond man’s murder. He’d carried no identification and they’d issued a statement asking anyone who might know something about him to come forward.

All of which begged the questions: If the rest of the world could see the blond man, too, did that mean she wasn’t crazy?

Or did it mean that the blond man was real, but she’d still hallucinated the man in the mirror and accompanying events?

Or did it mean she was so-far-gone crazy that now she was hallucinating news programs in a sick (though—if she had to say so herself—admirably determined and impressively cohesive) effort to lend credibility to her delusions?

Ugh. Tough questions.

She’d mulled over such convoluted thoughts for hours, until finally, in the wee hours of dawn, she’d achieved a measure of calm via a firm resolution: She would approach her current predicament the same way she would approach an archaeological inquiry, by applying the meticulous methods of a scientific analyst.

She would gather all the facts she could and, only when she had everything she

could dig up, would she endeavor to piece the facts together into the most accurate representation of reality she could achieve with them. There would be no further talk of crazy, nor thoughts of it, until she'd completed her investigation.

Critical to her investigation: a talk with Professor Keene. She needed to ask him questions about the relic she'd come to wish she'd never laid eyes on—like where the heck it had come from?

Maybe it wasn't a relic at all, she thought, briefly buoyed by the possibility, but a gag-relic of some kind, a special-effects prop from a *Stargate* episode or some other SciFi channel program. And maybe it had state-of-the-art, highly technical, cleverly hidden audio/visual feeds hooked into it somehow. And it all powered some really tiny, extraordinarily sophisticated projection screen system.

Which . . . er, didn't exactly explain the interaction between attacker and man in the mirror, but hey, she was just working up possibilities, devising and discarding.

Possibility: Maybe it was . . . uh, well, uh . . . cursed.

That thought made her feel inordinately foolish. Didn't sit well with her inner analyst.

Still, better foolish than mad-as-a-mirrormaker.

She'd phoned the professor last night, using the direct line to his room that he'd left her in one of his gazillion messages, but he'd not answered. She'd tried again first thing this morning, but no luck. Still sleeping, she supposed.

Bottom line, she was a pragmatist. She'd not gotten this far in her life by being illogical or prone to whimsy. She was a what-I've-got-in-my-hand kind of girl. And after intense reflection, she decided that she didn't feel crazy. She felt perfectly normal about everything except for this idiotic ongoing mirror-incident.

Maybe she *should* smash it, she thought peevishly. End of problems. Right?

Except, not necessarily. If she *was* crazy, her illusory sex-god would probably just take up residence in some other inanimate object (that certainly brought to mind a few intriguing ideas, especially something in her bedside table drawer). If

she *wasn't* crazy, she could conceivably be destroying one of the most pivotal, dogma-shattering relics in recent human history.

“Looks like I’m stuck fact-finding.” She puffed out an irritated little sigh.

Rummaging in her pack for her cell phone, she withdrew it, flipped it open, and glanced down at the screen. No messages. She’d been hoping the professor would call her back before she got tied up in classes all day.

Too late now. She turned off the phone, tucked it back in her bag, grabbed her coffee from the counter, paid the cashier, and hurried off.

She had classes back-to-back until 4:45 P.M., but the second she was done she was heading straight to the hospital.

5:52 P.M.

The Dan Ryan Expressway at rush hour was a level in Dante’s Hell.

Jessi was hopelessly gridlocked in stop-and-go traffic that was *way* more stop than go—so much stop, in fact, that she’d been working on homework for the past half hour—when her cell phone rang.

She tossed aside the notes she’d been taking, crept forward a celebration-worthy eighteen inches, whipped out her phone and answered, hoping it was the professor, but it was Mark Trudeau.

The statement was just forming on her tongue that there was no way she was taking on even *one more paper to grade* when he ripped all the words right out of her mouth by telling her he was calling to let her know the campus police had just informed him that Professor Keene was dead.

She started shaking, clenched the steering wheel, and exhaled a sob.

“And get this, Jess, he was *murdered*,” Mark relayed in an excited rush, clearly fascinated and clearly oblivious to the fact that she was crying, despite the wet snuffling sounds she was making. Men could be so dense sometimes.

Dimly, she realized traffic was creeping forward again. Eased her foot off the clutch. Dragged the sleeve of her jacket across her face.

“The cops are talking like he got mixed up in something bad, Jess. Said he recently pulled a lot of money out of his retirement and mortgaged his house big-time. I guess he owned some land somewhere in Georgia that he just sold too. Cops have no idea what he suddenly needed so much money for.”

Belatedly realizing the car in front of her had stopped again, she hit the brakes and came to an abrupt halt a bare inch behind the rear bumper of the car in front of her. The guy behind her honked angrily. Not just once, but *laid* on it, complete with assorted hand gestures. “Right,” she snapped through tears, making a gesture of her own in the rearview mirror, “like it’s *my* fault traffic stopped moving again. Get over it.”

Traffic was the least of her concerns. She closed her eyes.

The cops might not know why the professor had needed the money, but she did.

It would seem the mirror was a bona fide relic, after all, albeit one that had come—she was now willing to bet serious money—hot off the black market.

The professor had indeed gotten mixed up in something bad.

“Garroted,” Mark was saying. “He was actually garroted. Nobody does that anymore, do they? Who does that kind of thing?”

She palmed the microphone on her cell, stared unseeingly out at the sea of stopped cars. “What on earth is going on?” she half-whispered.

Mark continued talking, a distant, chafing din.

The professor and I have already had our time together this evening, the blond man had said. And she’d pushed the comment brusquely aside, too wrapped up in her own petty concerns and interests.

And now the professor was dead.

Correction, she thought, a little chill seeping into her bones, according to what Mark had just told her—time of death 6:15 P.M. Monday—he’d been dead before she’d even gone to pick up his books that night.

The whole time she’d been standing in his office he’d been dead.

“And get this,” said Mark, still blathering away, “Ellis, the department head, tells

me I'm gonna have to take the professor's classes for the rest of the term. Can you believe this shit? Like they can't afford to hire—"

"Oh, grow *up*, Mark," Jessi hissed, thumbing the OFF button.

When finally she managed to escape the tenth level of Hell, Jessi made a beeline for side streets and headed straight back to campus.

Thoughts tumbled in disjointed confusion through her mind. Amid them all was a single clear one, drawing her like a beacon.

She had to see the mirror again.

Why—she had no idea.

It was simply the only thing she could think of to do. She couldn't bring herself to go home. In her current state of mind she would climb the walls. She couldn't go to the hospital; there was no longer anyone to visit. She had a few close friends, but they tended to work as much as she, so dropping by unexpectedly wasn't the coolest thing to do, and besides, even if she did, what would she say—*Hi, Ginger; how have you been? By the way, either I've gone insane, or my life has taken on distinct shades of Indiana Jones, complete with mysterious relics, foreign villains, and spectacular audiovisual special effects.*

When she got back to the office there was police tape across the door.

That stopped her for a moment. Then she noticed it was campus police tape and tugged it aside. Violating university procedures didn't seem quite as felonious a felony as breaking a law in The Real World.

As she jiggled the key in the lock, making sure it really *was* locked this time, she asked herself just what she thought she was going to do once she was inside.

Strike up a conversation with a relic? Lay her hands on the glass? Try to summon a spirit? Make like it was a Ouija board or something?

As fate would have it, she didn't have to do a thing.

Because the moment she opened the door, a shaft of light splintered in from the hallway, straight onto the silvery glass.

Her feet froze. Her hands clenched on the door. Even her breath stopped mid-inhalation. She wasn't certain, but she fancied her heart paused a long, ponderous moment, as well.

The towering, half-naked, absolute sex-god of a man standing inside the mirror, glaring out at her, snarled, “ ’Tis high damned time you came back, wench.”

When Jessi was seventeen years old she'd almost died.

She'd gone to one of those indoor rock-climbing gyms (because her best friend had called to tell her that the football player she had a crush on was home from college that weekend and he and his friends were supposed to be there) and taken a horrible fall, breaking multiple bones and splitting her skull.

She'd missed the best parts of her senior year in high school, recuperating at home with her head shaved from where they'd inserted a metal plate to piece her skull back together, listening to other people's stories of proms and parties and graduations.

And the guy she'd been so crazy about hadn't even been at the climbing gym that day.

She'd learned a few things from the experience. One: the whole "best laid plans of mice and men" adage was absolutely true—she'd not gotten to rally her football team to the State finals the *only* year they'd made it in the past seven; she'd not gotten to wear the scrumptious pink prom dress that still hung in her closet; she'd not tossed her cap; she'd not attended a single senior party. And two: Sometimes when things got bad, a sense of humor was a person's only saving grace. You could either laugh or you could cry, and crying not only made you feel worse, it made you look worse too.

It occurred to her as she stood there, staring at the thing in the mirror that couldn't possibly be in the mirror, in a room where a recent attempt on her life had been made—said room's previous occupant having been murdered recently himself—that events of the past few days certainly qualified as bad, even by conservative standards.

She started to giggle.

She couldn't help it.

The sex-god's dark eyes narrowed and he scowled. " 'Tis no laughing matter. Get in here and close that door. *Now*. There is much of which we must speak and time is of the veriest essence."

She giggled harder, one hand to her mouth, the other clutching the doorjamb. *Time is of the veriest essence*. Who talked like that?

"For the love of Christ, wench, summon me out," he said, sounding exasperated. "Someone needs to shake you."

"Oh, I don't think so," she managed between giggles. Giggles that were starting to sound just a tiny bit hysterical. "And I am not a wench," she informed him loftily. And giggled.

He growled softly. "Woman, you summoned me out the other eve and I did you no harm. Will you not trust me again?"

She snickered. "I thought I was sound asleep and dreaming the other night. It had nothing to do with trust."

"I killed the man who was trying to kill you. Is that not reason enough to trust me?"

She stopped laughing. There it was. He was the one who'd snapped the blond man's neck and left him lying dead on the commons. Though a part of her brain knew it had to have been him—whether such events had transpired in a delusional world or The Real One—his remark drew her gaze to his hands. Big hands. Neck-snapping hands.

After a moment's hesitation, she stepped warily into the office. Another pause, then she slowly closed the door behind her.

The giggles were gone. A thousand questions were not.

Jamming her hands into the front pockets of her jeans, she stared at the mirror.

She closed her eyes. Squeezed them shut hard. Opened them. Tried it twice more for good measure.

He was still there. *Oh, shit*.

"I could have told you that wouldn't work," he said dryly.

“Am I crazy?” she whispered.

“Nay, you’re not daft. I am here. This is indeed happening. And if you wish to survive, you must credit what I tell you.”

“People can’t be inside mirrors. It’s not possible.”

“Tell that to the mirror.” He thumped his fists against the inside of the glass for emphasis.

“Funny. But not convincing.” Oh, that was weird, seeing him pound on the mirror from the inside!

“You must resolve your own mind on the matter. Best do so before another comes to kill you.”

His blasé response argued his case to her. Said he knew he was real, and if she was too dense to figure it out, it wasn’t his problem. Surely a delusion would endeavor to self-persist, wouldn’t it?

But *how* could he be real?

She had no precedent for dealing with the inexplicable. *Fact-finding. All I can do is explore what’s happening, and reserve judgment until I know more.*

Toward that end, shedding light on things, she reached for the wall switch and flipped on the overhead.

And got her first truly good look at him.

Crimeny, she thought, eyes widening as if to drink in even more of him. The two prior times she’d caught glimpses of him, they’d been briefly snatched and the room had been heavily shadowed. She’d absorbed only a general impression of him: a big, dark, intensely sexual man.

She’d not seen the details.

And what details they were!

Stunned, she looked down. Up. Down. Up again. Slowly.

“Take your time, lass,” he murmured, so softly she scarcely heard him. His next comment was deliberately beyond her audible range, a silky “I plan to with

you.”

He was tall, stuffing the mirror from top to bottom of frame. Powerfully built, with wide shoulders and rippling muscles, he wore a fabric of crimson and black around his waist—an honest-to-God kilt, if she wasn’t mistaken—glittering metallic wrist cuffs, and black leather boots.

No shirt. Wicked-looking black-and-crimson tattooed runes covered the left side of his sculpted chest, from the bottom of his rib cage, up over a nipple, across his shoulder, and to the edge of his jaw. Each powerful biceps was also encircled by a band of tattooed crimson-and-black runes. A thick, silky trail of dark hair began just above the navel on his ripped abs, slid down into the plaid.

Oh, God, was it tenting? Was that a bulge lifting the tartan?

Her gaze got stuck there for an awkward moment. Her eyes widened even further. Sucking in a shallow breath, she jerked her gaze away. A flush heated her cheeks.

She’d just ogled his penis.

Stood there, blatantly eyeing it. Long enough that he *had* to have noticed. Something was just not right with her. Her hormones had somehow gotten seriously out of whack. She was an artifact-ogler, not a penis-ogler.

She forced her gaze up to his face. It was as sinfully gorgeous as the rest of him. He had the chiseled, proud features of an ancient Celt warrior: strong jaw and cheekbones, a straight, aristocratic nose, flaring arrogantly at the nostrils, and a mouth so sexy and kissable that her own lips instinctively puckered, then parted, just looking at it, as if sampling a kiss. She wet them, feeling strangely breathless. Dark shadow stubbled his sculpted jaw, making his firm pink lips seem even more sexual against all that rough masculinity.

His hair wasn’t black as she’d thought in the dark, but a rich gleaming mahogany shot with shimmering strands of gold and copper. Half of it was caught in dozens of narrow braids, banded at the ends with glittering metallic beadwork. His eyes were burnt-whisky, his skin tawny-velvet.

He dripped primeval, elemental power, looked as much a relic as the mirror itself, a throwback to a time when men had been men and women had Done As They Were Told.

Her eyes narrowed. She couldn't stand men like that. Chauvinistic, domineering men who thought they could order women around.

Too bad her body didn't seem to be of the same mind. Too bad her body seemed downright intrigued by the various orders possible, like: *Take off your clothes, woman; let me get the taste of you on the back of my tongue . . .*

It didn't help that he looked like the kind of man who wouldn't take "no" for an answer, who would tolerate zero inhibitions on a woman's part; the kind of man that, once he got a woman in bed, didn't let her out again until he'd done everything there was to do to her, had fucked her so thoroughly that she could barely walk.

"Summon me out, woman," came the tight, low command laced by that sexy Scots burr. His voice was as incredible as his appearance. Deep and rich as hot, dark buttered rum, it slid down into her belly, pooling there in a slow burn.

"No," she said faintly. No way she was letting all that . . . whatever it was, too much testosterone by far . . . out again.

"Then I bid you, woman, cease looking at me like that."

"Like what?" she bristled.

"Like you wish to be using your tongue on me again. And on more than my back." He caught his lower lip between his teeth and flashed her a devilish smile.

"I didn't *mean* to lick you," she snapped defensively. "I told you, I thought you were a dream."

"Any dream you wish, woman. You need but summon me out." His gaze raked over her, burning hot, lingering at her breasts and thighs.

Heat suffused her skin where his gaze skimmed. "Not. Going. To. Happen."

He shrugged, powerful shoulders bunching and rippling. "Have it your way, wench. Die needlessly. Doona say I didn't offer my aid."

He turned in the mirror then. The silver encasing him seemed to ripple, the black stain around the edges flowed and ebbed as if the surface were suddenly liquid, then she was beholding a mere looking glass.

“Hey, wait!” she cried, panicking. “Get back here!” She needed answers. She needed to know what was going on. What the mirror was; how any of this was even happening; who was trying to kill her; would there really be more assassins sent after her?

“Why?” His deep butter-um voice resonated from somewhere within the glass.

“Because I need to know what’s going on!”

“Naught in this world is free, woman.”

“What are you saying?” she asked the smooth silver surface. She was conversing with a mirror. Alice in Wonderland had nothing on her.

“ ’Tis plain enough, isn’t it? I have something you need. You have something I want.”

She went absolutely still. Her breath caught in the back of her throat and her heart began to hammer. She moistened suddenly parched lips. “Wh-what?”

“You need my protection. You need me to keep you alive. I ken what’s going on, who’s coming after you, and how to stop them.”

“And what do you want in return?” she asked warily.

“Och, myriad things, lass. But we’ll keep it simple and start with freedom.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. No way. I don’t know the first—”

“You know all you need to know,” he cut her off flatly. “You know you’ll die without me. Think not to constrain me. I’ve been stuck in this bloody frigging mirror far too long for civility. This glass is the only prison I’ll suffer. I’ll no’ be allowin’ ye to be buildin’ another for me, woman.”

His brogue thickening, he spat the final words. She swallowed. Audibly. Her mouth had gone so dry that she heard tiny things crunch as her Adam’s apple rose and fell. She cleared her throat.

Suddenly there he was in the mirror again, looking at her, silver rippling like diamond-spiked water around him.

That sexy, arrogant mouth curved in a smile. If he’d meant it to be reassuring,

she thought, shivering, he'd missed the mark by a mile. It was a smile full of leashed power and chained heat. Barely leashed. Barely chained.

It occurred to her then that, had she gotten a good look at him the other night, she would probably never have released him, whether she'd believed herself to be dreaming or not. The killer she'd thought so terrifying was no match for this man. They weren't even remotely in the same league. Breaking the blond man's neck had probably been as easy for him as absently swatting a fly. Whatever he was, he had something *more*. Something normal people just didn't have.

She fumbled behind her for the doorknob.

"Let me out," he said, low and intense. "Say the words. I will be your shield. I will stand between you and all others. 'Tis what you need and you ken it. Doona be a fool, woman."

Shaking her head, she turned the knob.

"Will it be nay, then? Prefer you to die? Over me? Just what is it you fear I might do to you that would be so terrible?"

The way his heated gaze was lingering on certain parts of her made quite clear *some* of the things he was thinking about doing to her.

Which of course made her think about them, too, in great detail. And there she was, wet-pantied again. What on earth was wrong with her? Had her ovaries somehow gotten stuck in a permanent ovulation cycle? Were her eggs firing indiscriminately and constantly—and in some perverse, inversely proportionate fashion—with greater enthusiasm the *worse* the man seemed for her?

Yanking open the door, she backed out into the hall. "I need to think," she muttered.

"Think fast, Jessica. You've not much time."

"Great, just great. Every-freaking-body knows my name." With a fierce little scowl, she slammed the door so hard the frame shuddered.

"The next one he sends after you may arrive any moment," came his deep burr through the door, "and will be more sophisticated than the last. Mayhap it will be a woman. Tell me, lass, will you even see death coming?"

Jessi gave the door an angry little kick.

“Doona venture far. You’re going to need me.”

She gritted something rude at the door that he shouldn’t have been able to hear, but he did. It made him laugh out loud and say, “A physical impossibility, woman, or, believe me, most of us ‘asshole men’ would.”

She rolled her eyes and didn’t bother locking it this time.

As an afterthought, she plucked off the rest of the police tape, balled it up, and stuffed it in her pocket.

Maybe she’d get lucky and somebody’d steal the damned thing and get it out of *her* hair.

OPTIONS

1. Go to police. Tell all and request protection.
2. Get in touch with original delivery company, ship mirror back, hope that fixes everything.
3. Flee country.
4. Check self into mental hospital and trust, with lockups and padded walls, they’re safer than regular hospitals.

Jessi finished the last of her coffee, pushed aside the mug, stared down at her pathetic little list, and sighed.

She was still feeling shaky in the pit of her stomach, but compiling her list of options had calmed her a bit and forced her to take a realistic look at a completely surreal situation.

Number four was out: it reeked of casting one’s fate to the wind and, when all was said and done, if she had to be in a car wreck, she’d prefer to be the one driving when it happened—control of one’s own destiny and all that.

Number one was out. The police would laugh her right out of the station if she tried telling them she knew who’d murdered their John Doe: a tall, dark, and broody sex-god who was after his freedom, who just happened to be inside a ten-

thousand-year-old-plus mirror, who might also be a ruthless criminal that had been . . . er, paranormally interred inside said mirror for the . . . er, safety of the world.

Uh-huh. Wow. Even *she* thought she was nuts with that one.

That left numbers two and three as potential solutions. The way she figured it, fleeing the country and staying out of it forever—or at least until she was reasonably certain she'd been forgotten about—would cost a whole lot more than trying to ship the thing back, even with the exorbitant price of insurance figured in, and Jessi had to believe that if she just returned the relic, whoever was after it would leave her alone.

After all, what was she going to do? *Talk* about it, for heaven's sake? *Tell* people about the impossible artifact once it was gone? Totally discredit herself and ruin any chance she might one day have of a promising future in the field of archaeology?

As *if*.

Surely she could persuade them of that, whoever they were. Anyone with half a brain would be able to see that she'd never, in an Ice Age, talk.

She glanced around the university café; the cushioned wood booths were sparsely populated at this time of night, and no one was sitting near enough to eavesdrop. Pulling out her cell phone, she flipped it open, dialed Info, and got the number for Allied Certified Deliveries, the name she'd seen emblazoned on the side of the delivery truck.

At 8:55 P.M., she didn't expect an answer, so when she got one, she sputtered for a moment before managing to convey the purpose of her call: that she'd gotten a package she wanted to return, but she'd not been given a copy of the bill of lading, so she didn't know where to ship it back to.

Making no effort to mask her irritation, the woman on the other end informed her that the office was closed for the day, and she'd only answered because she'd been talking to her husband when their call had been dropped, and she thought it was him calling her back. "Try again tomorrow," she said impatiently.

"Wait! Please don't hang up," Jessi exclaimed, panicking. "Tomorrow might be too late. I need it picked up first thing in the morning. I've got to return this

thing *fast*.”

Silence.

“It was really expensive to ship,” Jessi shot into the silence, hoping money would keep the woman on the line and motivate her to be helpful. “Probably one of the more expensive deliveries you guys have done. It came from overseas and required special handling.”

“You going to pay to reship, or you trying to stick it to the shipper?” the woman asked suspiciously.

“I’ll pay,” Jessi said without hesitation. Though she loathed the thought of spending money on something she would end up with nothing to show for, at least she’d be alive to pay it off. She had a downright scary amount of credit on her Visa; it never ceased to amaze her how much rope banks were willing to give college students to hang themselves with.

“Got an invoice number?”

“Of course not. I just told you, I don’t have the bill of lading. Your guys forgot to give me a copy.”

“We never forget to give copies of the BOL,” the woman bristled. “You must have misplaced it.”

Jessi sighed. “Okay, fine, I misplaced it. Regardless, I don’t have it.”

“Ma’am, we do hundreds of deliveries a week. Without an invoice number, I have no way of knowing what delivery you’re talking about.”

“Well, you can look it up by last name, can’t you?”

“The computers are down for the night. They go off-line at eight. You’ll have to call back tomorrow.”

“It was an unusual delivery,” Jessi pushed. “You might remember it. It was a late-night drop. A recent one. I can describe the guys who brought it.” Swiftly, she detailed the pair.

There was another long silence.

Then, “Ma’am, those men were murdered over the weekend. Garroted, just like that professor man that’s been all over the news. Police won’t leave us alone.” A bitter note entered her voice. “They been acting like my husband’s company had something to do with it, like we got shady dealings going on or something.” A pause, then, “What did you say your name was again?”

Feeling like she’d just been kicked in the stomach, Jessi hung up.

She didn’t go straight to him.

She refused to do that.

The thought of such a swift show of defeat was too chafing.

The past few days had been a study in humility for her. Not a single thing had gone according to anything remotely resembling The Jessi St. James Plan For A Good Life, and she had the bad feeling nothing was going to for quite a while.

So she stubbornly toughed it out in the university café until half past midnight, sipping still more coffee that her frazzled nerves didn’t need, savoring what she suspected might be her last moments of near-normalcy for a long time, before caving in to the inevitable.

She had no desire to die. Crimeny, she’d hardly even gotten to live yet.

Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans. Her friend Ginger had given her a coffee mug with that quote on it a few months ago. If you spun it around, the other side said: *When did having a life become an event you had to schedule?* She’d stuffed it way in the back of her cupboard and not looked at it again, the sad truth of it shaving too close to the bone.

No, she certainly wasn’t ready to die. She wanted at least another sixty or seventy years. She hadn’t even gotten to the good parts of her life yet. Problem was, she didn’t suffer any illusions about her ability to, as he’d so succinctly put it, “see death coming.” She was a college student, an archaeology major, at that. People were not her forte. Not living ones, anyway. She was no slouch with the dead ones, like the Iceman or the Bog People, but that wouldn’t get her very far with an assassin. Sad fact was, Death could probably stalk up to her wearing a hooded black robe and toting a scythe, and she’d get all distracted wondering

about the age, origin, and composition of the scythe.

Ergo, like it or not—and dear God, she didn't—she needed him. Whatever he was. The professor was dead. The deliverymen were dead. She'd been next. Three out of four down. She felt like one of those ditzy heroines in a murder mystery, or one of those fluffy romance novels, the loose end that needed tidying up, the one the psychopath kept coming after. The helpless, girly girl. And she'd never considered herself helpless in her entire life. Girly, maybe, but not helpless.

Now, standing outside the door to Professor Keene's office yet again, she stiffened her spine, mentally preparing to fling herself upon an impossible being's mercy.

Either he would protect her as he claimed, or he really was some cosmically evil villain, justly imprisoned and lying through his teeth, who planned to kill her—the way things had been going for her lately—gruesomely and with much blood, right there on the spot.

If that was the case, she was damned if she did and damned if she didn't, her demise a mere bit of squabbling over place and time, so she should probably just buck up and get it over with.

She glanced at her watch—12:42 A.M.

Good-bye life as she knew it, hello chaos. Hopefully not just good-bye life.

She pushed open the door and stepped into the office. “Okay,” she told the silvery surface with a sigh, “I think we can make a deal.”

He was there before she'd even fully formed the word “think.” She finished the rest of the sentence a bit breathlessly.

A slow, exultant smile curved his lips.

“Deal, my ballocks. Get me the bloody hell out of here, woman.”

“Don’t give me excuses,” Lucan snarled into the phone. “Roman is dead. I need Eve in Chicago *now*.”

He rose and stood before the tall windows of his study, staring out at the London dawn as the first faint streaks of sun burned off the fog. The sky beyond was still dim enough that he could also see his own reflection superimposed on the tinted glass. Alone, he did not bother with a spell to conceal his appearance.

His entire skull was a miasma of crimson-and-black runes, his tongue flickered black inside his tattooed mouth when he spoke, and his eyes were feral crimson.

It was Thursday morning. He had twenty days.

He turned his gaze to the darker spot on the silk wallpaper where the Dark Glass had hung for so long. Cian’s captivity had been a constant source of amusement to him—the legendary Keltar, the most powerful of all Druids ever known, ensorcelled by one Lucan Myrrdin Trevayne.

His hands fisted, his jaw clenched. That empty spot *would* be filled again, and soon. Returning his attention to the conversation, he snapped, “The St. James woman knows she’s in danger now. There’s no telling what she’ll do. I need her taken care of immediately. But first, I need that damned mirror back. Roman said it was in the professor’s office. Have her ship it to my private residence the moment she arrives. Then get rid of the girl and anyone else who’s seen it.”

Damn Roman. The police were asking too many questions, and he suspected at least one or two officers had seen the Dark Glass, which meant retiring a few members of law enforcement, and *those* cases never closed. In the past he’d not denied Roman his preference for strangulation, so long as he went in, disposed of all problems before the police found any bodies, and got out fast, before an investigation was even opened.

But he hadn’t. He’d failed with the woman and ended up dead himself.

Which gave Lucan no small amount of pause.

How had Roman ended up on the commons with his neck broken? He could think of one man that possessed the deadly strength and skill to snap the Russian's neck as if popping chicken bones: Cian MacKeltar.

And if that were the case, someone had let him out of the mirror. Not good, not good at all.

The only person he could fathom might have done so was the St. James woman. According to Roman, when he'd last checked in, there were four people in Chicago who'd seen the Dark Glass or, like Dr. Liam Keene, had possessed critical knowledge of it, and Jessica St. James was the final one to be dispatched. Lucan knew well the Keltar had a way with women.

His upper lip curled. So much wasted on a primitive mountain-man, a Highlander, no less. Not just looks, strength, and charisma, but wild, pure magic. The kind of power Lucan had worked dozens of lifetimes to achieve a mere fraction of, the Keltar had been born with a hundredfold.

If the St. James woman had indeed been seduced to the Keltar's bidding, then Lucan was sending Eve to her death. He'd have his answer soon enough. If Eve went missing, he'd know he had a far more serious problem on his hands than he'd thought.

"Tell her to put her other contract on hold. I need her now." A pause. A growl. "I don't believe you have no way of reaching her. Find one. Get her in Chicago today or else."

He listened a moment, holding the phone away from his ear. After a long pause he said tightly, "I don't think you understand. I want her there now. I'd advise you to pass on my orders to her and let *her* decide." He punched off the phone, terminating the call. He knew what she would do. She trafficked in death for a living, and feared little, but she feared Lucan. They'd had a liaison a few years past. She knew his true nature. She would obey.

He rubbed his jaw, eyes narrowed. Samhain was too swift approaching. For the first time in centuries, he felt a whisper of unease. He'd been untouchable, virtually invincible for so long that, he didn't quite recognize the feeling.

At least he knew exactly where the mirror was. That alleviated much of his

unease. Still, if it weren't in his possession within a very short time, he would have no choice but to go after it himself.

He greatly preferred not to.

On those rare occasions he'd freed the Keltar from the Dark Glass, he'd stayed on heavily warded ground that had neutralized the Highlander's immense power until the mirror had safely reclaimed its captive. The complex, intense warding necessary to keep Cian MacKeltar's power suppressed required painstaking ritual and time.

Could he and his men manage to ward the university's grounds around the mirror?

Possibly. It would be risky. Many things could go wrong. They could be seen. There could be other magic, both old and new, on the grounds that might create conflicts. People didn't know it, but magic was all around them. Always had been, always would be. It merely concealed itself with greater sophistication now than it had in days of yore.

Dare he confront the Highlander with his full powers intact on unwarded ground?

Surely, after a thousand years, he'd surpassed Cian MacKeltar and was the greater sorcerer at last!

He turned away from the windows, wishing he felt certain of that. It had not been his superior sorcery that had put the Keltar where he was. It had been well-played deceit and treachery.

Perhaps the Keltar hadn't been freed.

Perhaps Roman had fallen prey to another assassin. They did that sometimes, went after each other for money or glory or the challenge of it.

He'd know for certain in a day or two. Then he'd decide upon his next move.

Cian stood, hands fisted at his sides, waiting. He'd known she would return. She was no fool. She'd been wise enough to identify the mirror as her most effective

weapon when Roman had threatened her; he'd not doubted she'd see the wisdom of his offer. He'd just not been certain how long it might take her, and time was everything to him now.

Twenty days.

'Twas all he needed from her.

'Twas not, by far, all he *wanted* from her. All he wanted from her would bring a blush to the cheeks of even the most practiced whore.

Standing a few feet beyond his prison, staring at him, her dark green eyes were huge, her lips softly parted, and those dream-come-true breasts were rising and falling with each anxious breath she drew.

He couldn't wait to taste them. Rub back and forth, teasing her nipples with heated swirls and flicks of his tongue. Suckle her, firm and deep. Breasts like that made a man want babes at them. *His* babes. But not too often, or there'd not be time enough for him.

He tossed his head, beaded braids clattering metallically, drawing tight rein on his lustful thoughts.

The moment she summoned him forth, he would use Voice on her.

His skin was crawling with the need to escape the place Lucan surely knew he was by now. He'd killed the assassin in the wee hours of Tuesday morn. A full twenty-four hours had passed since then. Though he'd not walked free in the world for longer than he cared to recall, from his purloined books and papers and view in Lucan's study, he had a fair notion of the weft and weck of the modern world. It was both horrifyingly larger and shockingly smaller than ever it had been, with billions of people (even a Keltar Druid felt a measure of awe at those kind of numbers), yet telephones that could span continents in mere moments, computers that could instantly retrieve all manner of information and connect people on opposite poles, and airplanes that could bridge continents in under a day. It was confounding. It was fascinating.

It meant they had to move. *Now*.

Voice, the Druid art of compulsion, was one of his greatest talents. As a stripling lad on the verge of manhood—the time of life when a Keltar's powers became

apparent and often fluctuated wildly while developing—for nigh a week he'd strolled about the castle using Voice on all and sundry without realizing it. He'd caught on only because he'd grown suspicious as to why everyone kept scrambling to please him. He'd learned to be careful, to listen to his own tones for that unique layering of voices. Only a bumbling fool, or a novice with a death wish, wielded magyck inadvertently.

When free of the mirror, on unwarded ground, there was none alive but Lucan himself who could withstand his command of Voice—and only because 'twas Cian who'd taught the bastard the art. In the practice of Druidry, mentor and pupil developed resistance to each other during the process of training.

She would heel nicely. Women did. It wasn't their fault nature had designed them to be so malleable. They were softer all around. He would command her to lead him to a safe place where they could go to ground. And once there—och, once there, he had centuries of unsated lust for things other than vengeance, and this woman with her ripe curves and creamy skin and tangle of short glossy hair was the answer to all of them!

What better way to spend the final twenty days of his indenture than feeding his every sexual hunger, indulging his deepest desires and most carnal fantasies with this sensual delicacy of a woman?

At that moment, the sensual delicacy of a woman notched her chin up.

Stubbornly.

There might even have been a glint of fire in her eyes.

"I'm not letting you out until you answer a few questions," she informed him coolly.

He snorted with impatience. Of all the moments for her to get contrary! Women certainly knew how to pick them. "Wench, we have no time for this. Lucan has no doubt already dispatched another assassin who is drawing ever nearer as we speak."

" 'Lucan'?" she pounced. "Is that who wants the mirror back?"

"Aye."

" 'Lucan' who?"

He shifted his weight from foot to foot. Crossed his arms. “Why? You think you might know him?” he snapped sardonically, one dark brow arching. When her nostrils flared and her chin tipped higher, he sighed and said, “Trevayne. His name is Lucan Trevayne.”

“Who and what are you?”

“You called my name when you released me the first time,” he said impatiently. “ ’Tis Cian MacKeltar. As for the what of me, I’m but a man.”

“The blond man said you were a murderer.” Her voice was poison-apple sweet. “Remember him? The one you murdered.”

“Och,” he said indignantly, “and there’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“He said you were locked away for the safety of the world.”

“Hardly. Your world, Jessica, would be far safer with me in it.”

“So why are you in a mirror?” She brightened, as if at a sudden cheerful thought. “Are you, like, a genie? Can you grant wishes?”

“If you mean a *djinn*, even the feeblest of bampots know they doona exist. Nay, I doona grant wishes.”

“Yeah, well, everyone also knows men in mirrors don’t exist. So how did you come to be in one?”

“I was tricked. How else would a man end up in a mirror?”

“How were you tricked?”

“ ’Tis a long story.” When she opened her mouth to press, he said flatly, “And not one of which I care to speak. Leave be.”

Her eyes narrowed like a cat’s. “That blond man also said the mirror was an Unseelie piece. I looked up ‘Unseelie’ on the ’Net. It’s not a classification of artifact. It’s a classification of *fairy*”—she sneered the word. “What, I ask you, am I supposed to make of that?”

“That ’tis an exceedingly rare artifact?” he suggested lightly. “Woman, we’ve no time to discuss such matters now. I’ll answer all your questions once you’ve

freed me and we're on the move."

The lie spilled easily from his tongue. He would silence her concerns with a simple command laced with Voice the moment she let him out. He planned to immediately toss a few other commands her way, as well. He was a man who'd been without a woman far too long, and his hunger was immense. Contemplating the erotic orders he would give her stiffened his cock and drew his testicles tight. *Bring that sweet ass over here, Jessica. Open that lovely mouth of yours and lick this. Turn around, woman, and let me fill my hands with those splendid breasts while I bend you over the—*

"Why would someone want to trick you into a mirror?"

Jarred from the lustful stupor of his thoughts, he stepped back, drawing silver around his lower body to conceal the rising of his kilt. He doubted such blatant proof of his intentions would serve as persuasion to free him. Bloody hell, he should have used Voice to get himself some modern clothing when he'd dispatched Roman the other eve! Those tight blue jeans both men and women favored would likely hold down a shaft of even his size. "Because by binding me to it, the one who tricked me gained immortality. Each Unseelie relic offers a Dark Power of some sort. Living forever, never aging, never changing, is the Dark Glass's gift," he growled. By Danu, what was it going to take to get her to let him out of the blethering glass?

"Oh." She stared at him blankly for a moment. "So let me get this straight: You're telling me that not only are there people inside mirrors, and fairies somewhere busily crafting artifacts endowed with paranormal attributes, but there are also immortals skulking around my world?"

He nearly snarled aloud with frustration. "I very much doubt they 'skulk,' woman. And, to the best of my knowledge, the Fae haven't crafted aught in millennia, not since they withdrew to their hidden realms. And doona be facetious. I'm merely answering your questions."

"Impossible answers."

"Does not the maxim still hold that once a thing occurs, 'tis impossible, 'tis impossible, ergo, 'tis possible?"

"I've never seen an immortal, and I've certainly never seen a fairy."

“You split hairs. You’ve seen me. And best hope you never do see either of *them*.”

“Why—?”

“Jessica,” he said softly, menacingly, infusing her name with the promise of infinite dangers, “I am going to count to three. If you permit me to reach that number without having begun the chant to release me, I will rescind my offer. I will not so much as lift a finger when the next killer comes for you. I will sit back and watch you die a slow and heinous death. I’m beginning now. One. Two ___”

“There’s no need to get pissy,” she said pissily. “I planned to say it; I just wanted to clear a few things up first—”

“Thr—”

“All right, I’m saying it! I’m saying it! *Lialth bree che bree*—”

“Bloody hell, wench, *finally*!”

“—*Cian MacKeltar, drachme se-sidh!*” **Jessi finished** breathlessly.

Heart hammering inside her chest, she eased back nervously, her gaze riveted to the mirror.

The silver went smoky and dark, boiling with shadows, like a doorway opening onto a storm. Then the black stain around the edges expanded, swallowing up the entire surface. Simultaneously, golden light blazed from within the engravings on the frame, painting fiery runes across her clothing, the furniture, the walls of the office. The disconcerting sensation of spatial distortion in the room increased to a nails-on-a-chalkboard degree, rasping over her nerve endings.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the light dimmed and the black cleared, revealing a watery silver that rippled and danced like the surface of Lake Michigan on a windy day.

One booted foot pushed through, then a powerful thigh, as the one-dimensional image crossed some kind of fairy-tale threshold and transformed from a mere reflection into a three-dimensional man, bit by bit.

It was impossible. It was terrifying. It was the most thrilling thing she’d ever seen.

Out came those kilt-clad hips, that six-pack abdomen, followed by his sculpted upper body rippling with those wicked-looking crimson-and-black tattoos.

Last came that sinfully gorgeous dark face, his white teeth flashing in an exultant smile, his whisky eyes glittering with triumph.

He gave a regal, full-of-himself toss of his head, beaded braids tinkling, as he fully exited the mirror.

The sensation of spatial distortion eased and the glass went flat silver again,

reflecting his tight ass and beautifully muscled back

Jessi braced herself, trying to console herself with the thought that if she was going to die now, at least she'd gotten one final heaping helping of eye-candy. This man belonged in the RBL Romantica Braw and Bonny Beefcake Farm. Crimeny, this man probably *owned* the farm or, if not, had stood stud to the mothers of half the other members.

Though he'd looked massive enough inside the glass, outside it, he seemed even larger. The man had presence, that elusive quality that made some people lodestones, drawing others, even against their will. And he knew it.

From the looks of him, he'd always known it.

Arrogant, cocky prick.

But was he a murderous one? *That* was the important question.

"If you're going to kill me, I'd appre—"

"Cease speaking, wench. You will bring that sweet ass over here and kiss me now."

Jessi gaped, mouth open, midword. Snapped her mouth closed. Opened it again. Her head suddenly itched just beneath the skin, above her metal plate. She rubbed at her scalp. "As if." She meant to hiss it indignantly, but it came out more of a squeak. Sweet ass? He thought she had a sweet ass? They could form a mutual admiration society of two.

"Remove that woolen, woman, and show me your breasts."

Choking on an inhalation, she sputtered for several seconds. Numerous were the men who'd tried to go there—even she knew she had exceptional breasts—but none quite so obviously and without exerting even an ounce of seductive effort. She clamped her hands over them defensively. "Oh, I so don't think that's going to ha—"

"Cease speaking," he roared. *"You will not speak again unless I tell you to."*

Jessi drew back like a cobra, scratching her scalp again. He couldn't be serious!

He certainly looked like he was.

After a moment's stunned silence, in a voice sweet enough to cause cavities in porcelain caps, she said, "You can go fuck yourself, you great big domineering Neanderthal. Wake-up call: Guess what? We're not in the Stone Age anymore."

"As I pointed out earlier, a physical impossibility. And I ken full well what epoch it is. *Come here, Jessica St. James. Now.*"

Jessi blinked at him. A sudden thought occurred to her; one that would explain much about this man. "How long have you been inside that mirror?" she demanded.

A muscle worked in his jaw. "I told you to *cease speaking.*"

Despite his persistent asininity, her temper was decreasing as her suspicion that she was correct was increasing. "Well, duh, clearly I'm not going to, so you may as well answer my question."

His eyes narrowed, that whisky gaze swept her from head to toe intently. "Eleven hundred and thirty-three years."

Whuh. She sucked in an astounded breath. That would place him in—no! The ninth century? No way. A living, breathing, ninth-century man, right here in front of her, somehow trapped in an ancient relic and cast forward eleven centuries?

Chills rippled across every square inch of her skin. Even the hair on her head felt as if it were trying to rise. "*Really?*" She nearly squealed the word, she was so delighted. The remnants of her hot temper collapsed into a pile of ash.

Oh, the things he might be able to tell her! Had the legendary King Cináed mac Ailpin been his contemporary? Had he lived through those mighty battles? Had he seen the unification of the Scots and Picts? Were those incredible wrists cuffs genuine ninth-century work? What were those tattoos, anyway? And those runes on the mirror—was it possible they comprised a previously undiscovered language? Holy *shit!* For that matter, was it really from the Stone Age? How could that be? Where had it come from? Who'd made it? What was it made of? Now that she'd conceded the reality of his existence, she had a gazillion questions about it. They all collided in her mind, getting tangled up in one another, and she ended up gapping at him in stunned silence.

It took her several moments to realize that he was regarding her with exactly the

same expression.

As if he couldn't quite believe *she* existed.

There they stood, in Professor Keene's office, ten feet separating them, each eyeing the other with blatant incredulity and suspicion. Now, that was just silly. What could he possibly find hard to believe about *her*?

"*Say my name, wench,*" he thundered.

She shook her head, stupefied by all her questions, befuddled by his request. "Cian MacKeltar. Why?"

He looked mildly appeased. Then suspicious again. "*Scratch your nose, woman.*"

"It doesn't itch."

"*Stand on one foot.*"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "*You* stand on one foot."

"Bloody hell," he breathed, as if to himself, "it can't be." He gave her that intent scan from head to toe again, seemed to hold a brief but heated inner discourse with himself, then nodded toward the desk. "*Go sit in that chair.*"

"I don't feel like it. I'm perfectly happy standing right where I am, thank you."

"*Moisten your lips?*" His gaze fixed on her mouth.

It took considerable effort not to moisten them while he was looking at them like that. It made her fixate on his own incredibly kissable mouth, made her want to not only wet her lips but pucker up and hike her "sweet ass" right over there. Maybe even show him her breasts, after all. She was appalled at the indiscriminatory nature of hormones—how awful that it was possible to actively dislike a man, have nothing in common with him, including not even existing in the same world—and still want to tear his clothes off and have hot animal sex with him.

Stoically, she resisted. "What's your deal?"

"Christ," he whispered slowly, "I've been in there for so long, I've lost it."

“ ‘Lost’ what? Oh, you mean your mind. Yeah, well, not going to argue with you there.”

He stared at her a long moment in silence, frowning. Then his brow eased and his eyes cleared. “Nay, my mind is still as extraordinarily superior as it has always been. No matter. There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

God, he was arrogant. She marveled at the sheer, unmitigated cockiness of the man. Had all ninth-century men been that way?

In retrospect, it occurred to her that she should have seen it coming.

She was, after all, a fan of history, a studier of mankind, a ponderer of ancient civilizations. She knew what life had been like a thousand years ago for women.

Men had been Men.

And women had been Property.

And somehow, she *still* managed to be utterly unprepared when he ducked that sexy, dark head of his and charged her.

“*Oomph!*” Jessi grunted, as his shoulder made contact with her stomach.

Her feet left the ground, her world tilted precariously, and the next thing she knew, she was hanging upside down over his shoulder.

One of his muscle-bound arms banded her waist, pinning her to his shoulder. The other hand splayed firmly on her bottom.

She parted her lips and was just about to let loose a screech that would do a banshee proud, when his hand moved.

Possessively. Intimately. Dipping right between her legs.

He pressed strong fingers against the opening of her vulva through her jeans, his thumb expertly finding her clitoris at the same time.

Fire exploded red-hot inside her. Her mouth, open on an intended shriek of rage, released a soft, stunned exhalation of air instead.

His big warm hand rested there a moment, applying a firm but gentle, relentless pressure. Enough to bring every nerve ending brutally to life and awaken an

aching hunger deep within her womb.

He said nothing. She said nothing, either, mostly because, at the moment, all she could think of to say was: Excuse me, but your hand seems to have slipped between my legs and if you'll move it just the tiniest bit, I bet I could come.

His hand was gone.

It returned, lower, banding her to him by the backs of her knees.

Reason returned also, accompanied by fury. The sad part was that what he'd just done had made her so instantly, incredibly horny that she wasn't sure if she was more furious at him for doing it in the first place, or for stopping when he had.

And *that* made her even more furious still.

"Put me down," she managed to hiss. So maybe it came out a bit more breathy than sibilant, but it was the best she could do upside down with her boobs in her face.

"Haud yer wheesht, woman."

"Hold my *what*?"

"It means 'hush,' Jessica. Just hush. Would it kill you to hush?"

"Probably," she snapped. "Put me *down*. I can walk."

"Nay. I've no desire for you to be master of your destiny in any manner, however small. You are too unpredictable."

"*I'm* unpredictable?"

"Aye."

She was speechless a moment. Then she pinched his butt, hard.

"Ow!" He smacked her bottom.

"Ow!" she yelped.

"Behave," he growled. "Tit for tat, lass. Remember that." The arm banding her waist relaxed, he repositioned her on his shoulder, then tightened his grip again,

making her realize she probably couldn't get off his shoulder if her life depended on it. That single muscle-bound arm was as unyielding as reinforced steel.

The abruptness with which he shifted her jostled her backpack, still looped over her shoulders. Crammed with purse, laptop, assorted notepads, pens, pencils, and a four-inch-thick *Ancient Civilizations* textbook, it yielded to gravity, slid down, and *thumped* her in the back of the head.

Hard.

"Ow!" she yelled again. "Shit! Put me down this instant, you brute!"

"Unbelievable," she thought she heard him mutter.

"Oh—you think so?" she snarled. "I'm the one flung over a primate's shoulder. *You're* the primate. I'm the one entitled to be saying 'unbelievable.' Not you."

"Unbelievable," he muttered again. He spun about so quickly that she nearly puked the five extra cups of coffee she hadn't really wanted but had drunk anyway in the café earlier, all over that magnificent butt she'd just pinched, and yes, like his arm, the man had buns of steel.

Plucking up the massive mirror, he tucked it beneath the arm he'd freed by shifting her, and turned for the door. Woman on one side, artifact on the other. Not even straining.

And she knew how heavy that mirror was. The two deliverymen had wrestled with its weight.

Stalking out into the corridor, he demanded, "Which way?"

She raised her head for as much clearance as she could gain with thirty-eight pounds of backpack—she'd weighed it once so she could factor the toting about of it into her daily caloric intake; it had earned her two Krispy Kremes every other morning—resting against her skull. "Why should I tell you?" she said snottily.

He bit her hip.

"Left," she gritted.

He turned left and took off at a trot.

The strain on her neck was too much. She put her head back down. Her breasts were in her face and, as she bounced against his back with each step he took, her backpack *thunked* her steadily in the back of the head. At least her face was cushioned against the repeated blows. She wasn't getting her nose hammered *rat-a-tat-tat* into his spine. Thank God for small blessings. Or two large ones, as the case may be.

"Where are you taking me?" she mumbled against her sweater.

"I am taking you to whatever manner of transportation you have. You are then taking us to procure suitable lodgings."

"I am?"

"If you wish to live."

She wished. She mumbled directions to the lot in which her car was parked.

"You're mumbling, lass."

She mumbled again.

"What was that?"

She mumbled again.

"Did you just say something about your breasts?" he said warily. A pause, then a reverent "Och, Christ, they're in your face!" He stopped so abruptly her backpack *thumped* the back of her head in double time: a soft *whump* followed by a solid *thwack*, dazing her.

When she felt his chest shaking, it took her a few moments to identify the motion. He was laughing. The rat-bastard was laughing.

"I *so* hate you," she told her breasts. Meaning not them, of course, but him.

As he continued to laugh, the fight went out of her, up in a puff of smoke. She was tired, she was freaked out, and she really just wanted to walk on her own two feet. "Would you *please* put me down?" she said plaintively.

She suspected he must have felt the diminishing of tension in her muscles, read her body language, and knew, mentally, she'd capitulated.

His laughter subsided. He bent and gently deposited her on her feet. His scotch-gold gaze glittered with amusement and sexual heat he made no effort to disguise. “Better?” He cupped her chin with one big hand, thumb brushing her lower lip.

She twisted her face away. “Better. Come on. Let’s get out of here before someone sees us with the professor’s—”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Jess?” Mark Trudeau barked sharply behind her.

Jessi turned disbelievingly. What—had the mere thought been a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Mark’s office was a few hundred feet down the hall from Professor Keene’s. When she’d passed it earlier, there’d been no lights on. Didn’t he have a life? What was he doing here so late?

Was nothing going to go right anymore?

Great, just great. This was just what she needed: Mark running off to tattle to anyone who would listen that not only had she crossed police lines and gone into the professor’s office, but she’d made off with a priceless, mysterious artifact. If the police did the least bit of checking into things, they would discover that what she’d taken was what the (murdered) deliverymen had delivered to the (murdered) professor.

And she would be oh-so-incriminatingly on the lam, nowhere to be found, last seen in the company of a tall, dark, kilt-clad stranger, “stealing” the fabulously expensive black-market relic that three people had already died over.

Without getting the slightest chance to tell her side of the story and point out that somebody’d tried to murder her too.

As if anyone would believe her anyway.

Shit, shit, shit. When all this was over, she really wanted to be able to finish her degree at the university where she’d begun it, not via correspondence courses from jail. That kind of stuff just didn’t look good on a resumé.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Mark, it’s two in the morning! *What* are you doing here?”

“I believe I just asked you that.” Close-set brown eyes behind rimless glasses darted from her to the half-naked, towering man toting the mirror, and back to her again.

What could she say? Dredging her mind, she drew an empty net. Try though she might, she couldn’t think of a single excuse for her current circumstances—convincing or otherwise. She would have been grateful even for an absurd one, but apparently her brain was done for the day.

As she stood there, staring at him like the biggest idiot, Cian MacKeltar took care of the problem.

“You will go back in that room from whence you came, and remain in there, silent, until well after we’ve gone. Now.”

Mark turned and cantered dutifully back down the hall toward his office without so much as a neigh of protest.

Wow. Jessi blinked up at Cian MacKeltar.

“Hmm,” he murmured softly, staring after the retreating grad student. “Mayhap ’tis only her.”

“ ‘Her’? Do you mean me? What me?” Jessi said expectantly.

“Puny little man,” he scoffed, as Mark obediently closed the door.

Was that it? Was that why Mark had slunk off—because he was puny and Cian MacKeltar was so big and forbidding?

She tipped her head back, eyeing him. At six and a half feet, and a good two-hundred-plus pounds of pure muscle, he dwarfed people. With those wild dark braids tangling halfway down his back and those wicked red-and-black tattoos licking across his chest, up to the edge of that whisker-shadowed jaw, he looked downright primeval: an ancient, deadly warrior stalking the halls of the university. She supposed his mere appearance might have been enough to make Mark decide he clearly wouldn’t be winning any arguments with this man, so there was little point in beginning any.

How nice it must be to have such an impact on the world! If reincarnation was the way of things, she wanted to come back as Cian MacKeltar. She’d like to be the asshole man, for a change, rather than subject to asshole men’s dictates. And

if she were going to be the asshole man, she'd like to do it up right and be the biggest and baddest.

"That was amazing," she said fervently. "He is *such* a pain in the butt. I can't tell you how many times I've wished I could get him to just go away like that. Like he had no choice but to obey me, or something."

"Come, Jessica." Cian MacKeltar closed a hand around her upper arm. "We must away ourselves."

They awayed.

An hour later they pulled under the canopy of the Sheraton in downtown Chicago.

Jessi had wanted to go home and get a few things, but Cian MacKeltar had immediately, vehemently vetoed that.

The next assassin could already be awaiting you there, woman, he'd said, and she'd shivered. How creepy to think someone might even now be lurking in her dark apartment, waiting to kill her. How odd to think she couldn't go home. Maybe not for a long, long time.

Maybe never again.

This was it, she'd realized while driving. She'd gone too far to turn back now. She was officially on the run. Her situation wouldn't have been so dire if Mark hadn't caught her leaving with the artifact.

But he had. That milk was spilt, and there was no point crying over it.

She glanced over at Cian, barely able to see him over the top of the huge mirror that was wedged sideways between the bucket seats of her car. A good quarter of the mirror was hanging out the open hatchback, which was bungeed carefully around it, with various bits of her clothing—jackets and sweaters and T-shirts that tended to accumulate in her car as the seasons changed—wedged protectively between metal and glass.

Head flush to the ceiling, he looked miserably uncomfortable. It had been as difficult to cram him into the tiny car as it had been to finesse in the mirror.

They'd argued over the top of the looking glass the entire way downtown. He took backseat driving to a whole new level.

Cease ceasing movement so abruptly! Christ, woman, must you catapult forward after each cessation? Are you certain you've strapped the mirror securely? We should stop and check it. By Danu, wench, try nudging this beast gently, not kicking it with both heels! A silence, a slew of choked curses, then: Horses! What the bloody hell is wrong with horses? Have they all been slain in battle?

When she'd finally cranked up her favorite Godsmack CD in an effort to tune him out, he'd let out a roar that had rattled the windows in her car: *By all that's holy, woman, what is that hideous noise? Cease and desist! A battlefield at full charge could be no more cacophonous!*

Huh. She loved Godsmack. The man clearly had no taste in music.

Scowling, she'd stuffed in Mozart's *Requiem*—which she reserved for only her broodiest days, usually during finals week—and in moments, he'd been whistling cheerfully along. Cheerfully. Go figure.

"You're going to have to stay here," she informed him. "I'll get the room and come back for you."

"I doona think so," he growled.

"You don't look like the rest of us."

"Nay," he agreed. "I am bigger. Stronger. Better."

The look she gave him said she had something nasty on her tongue and couldn't scrape it off. "That's not what I meant. There's no way we'll be able to keep a low profile with you walking around dressed like that."

"Leave it to me, woman."

Before she could utter another word, he grappled with the handle, opened the door, and stepped out. Or rather uncramped and unfolded himself onto the pavement, closing the door behind him.

For a man from the ninth century, he sure seemed to know a lot about modern-day things, she mused, though it seemed to be from having observed them, not from having interacted with them. When he'd first gotten in, he'd examined everything, twisting knobs and pushing buttons. He'd even eyed the steering wheel consideringly. Fortunately, he'd seemed to think better of it. Unfortunately, she didn't think his restraint would last long. He liked to be the

one in charge.

“You will not look at me,” she heard him say to the valets. *“You will see only her.”* A silence. Then, *“And you will not look at her breasts.”*

Jessi blinked and burst out laughing. The man was such a Neanderthal! Like her breasts were his or something! What did he think—that the valets would just dutifully obey him as Mark had?

She had news for him: He wasn’t that impressive.

“You’re not that impressive,” she said, stepping from the car and casting a dry look across the roof.

Five valets stood around the car, looking at her, and only at her, and only at her face.

“May we take your luggage, ma’am?” one of them said, looking her dead in the eye.

Men rarely did that. At least not at first. She smoothed her pink sweater down and took a slow, luxuriatingly deep breath. That always worked.

Five gazes remained fixed on her face.

She glanced down; they were still there, round and perky and obvious as ever. Mystified, she said, “No luggage,” and removed her car key from the key ring.

Cian moved to the rear of the car and began unstrapping the mirror.

“We can’t take that in with us!” Belatedly, she realized it would have been much smarter to go to some seedy No-Tell Motel way out on the outskirts. But the Sheraton down on the lake was the only hotel she’d ever stayed in (during an archaeology seminar last summer), and when they’d left campus, she’d headed for it, driving on a sort of bemused autopilot, far too busy defending her driving skills to be thinking clearly. Getting him into a room without causing a memorable stir was going to be difficult enough. They needed to be inconspicuous. Taking the mirror in with them just wasn’t possible. Then again, she thought, frowning, they could hardly leave it in the car, either.

Again, he merely said, “Leave it to me, woman.”

It was then that she realized, with a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, that it was only a matter of time before the police came and arrested her.

As if a grim portent, a few blocks down the street a police siren began to sound.

She shivered.

Oh yeah. Only a matter of time.

He still had it. *Bloody hell, he still had it!*

There was nothing wrong with him. There was something wrong with *her*.

Mirror beneath one arm, the other wrapped around his woman, he steered her into the brilliantly lit, polished, and gleaming lodgings.

Christ, it felt good to walk free! And to walk free with such a beautiful woman on his arm? 'Twas heaven to be alive.

Even hunted. Even knowing what lay ahead. 'Twas far more than he'd thought he'd get at such a late hour in the game.

Her city seemed much like what he'd seen of London, with insignificant differences. Both enormous, both massively populated, frenetic with cars and people rushing to and fro, but her city had taller buildings than aught he'd glimpsed from Lucan's study.

He continued tossing out commands in Voice as they strode into the lodgings she'd selected. *Doona look at us. Move out of my way. Do not notice the mirror. We are not here.*

Memory spells were extremely complicated and could cause terrible, irreversible damage if done wrong. 'Twas easier to turn eyes away than attempt to make people forget.

Still, nonspecific commands such as "we are not here" weren't truly effective. They served mostly to gloss things over a bit, make events seem dimmer. For Voice to be truly compelling, the commands needed to be concise, precise. Commands too vague or complicated could get messy. Orders strongly counter to a person's fundamental beliefs could cause intense pain.

“Why don’t you just stand here and I’ll go get a room?” She tipped her head back and looked up at him. “And you don’t have to hold on to me,” she added peevishly. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

He smiled. He liked that. “Where?”

“ ‘Where’ what?”

“Where does one ‘get a room’?”

“Oh. Over there.” She pointed. “Wait here.”

“You will cease attempting to give me orders, wench.” He tried Voice on her again, thinking perchance something in their earlier environment had conflicted with his use of magyck.

“You will cease ordering me to cease giving you orders,” she said exasperatedly. “I’m just trying to help.”

“The day I need help seeing to the needs of a woman is the day I may as well be dead.”

She gave him a measuring look. “Actually, it’d be nice if more men felt that way. Of course, you still need to lose that whole me-Tarzan, you-Jane thing.”

He had no idea what she was *havering* about, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was the getting of a room.

He escorted her where she’d pointed, GUEST CHECK-IN, and propped the mirror carefully against the short wooden wall.

A trim, auburn-haired, fortyish man with a bristly mustache came over, looking as if he’d rather be anywhere else at this hour.

“You will give us a room. Now. And stop looking at me.”

Beside him, Jessica said hastily, “You’ll have to excuse him. He can be a bit heavy-ha—oh, for heaven’s sake!” She changed both sentence and direction of her gaze midstream, frowning up at him when the desk clerk obediently, and without protest whatsoever, averted his eyes and began processing the paperwork for a room. “People keep obeying you like you’re some kind of . . . of . . . well, *god* . . . or something.”

“Imagine that.” *In my day, lass, I was.*

“I can’t.”

“I’m excruciatingly aware of that,” he said dryly.

“Well, why do they keep doing it?”

“Mayhap, woman, they recognize a Man among men.” He couldn’t resist provoking her. “That would be Man with a capital ‘M.’ ”

She rolled her eyes, as he’d known she would.

He bit back a smile. There was no point in explaining to her about Voice. She wouldn’t understand; the wench was infuriatingly immune. Impossibly immune. His amusement faded. He narrowed his eyes, studying her for the hundredth time, trying to discern something—anything—different about her that might explain her condition.

He couldn’t discern a blethering thing. Of all the wenches the Fates might have appointed to serve as his reluctant savior, the humorless bitches had sent him the only woman he’d ever encountered that he couldn’t control.

“I’ll just need a credit card,” the man behind the counter was saying.

Cian opened his mouth to use Voice again, but Jessica was already handing the man something. He had no idea what it was. He shrugged. He didn’t mind letting her feel useful. He knew women liked to feel important too. ’Twas but that he preferred to make them feel important in other ways.

Like as women. In his bed. While he was inside them.

And this one, och, this one did something strange to him. A subtler version of that electrifying jolt he’d felt the first time she’d touched him had been happening each time he touched her. It made it nigh impossible to keep his hands off her. The entire time she’d been over his shoulder he’d felt a gentle current sizzling through the length and breadth of his body. Wherever their bodies were touching, he felt as if heat lightning crackled just beneath his skin.

And he knew, though she pretended otherwise, that she felt it too. When he’d put his hand so blatantly on her woman’s mound, he’d been prepared for indignation, outrage, a fierce tongue-lashing. He’d deserved it. He’d never

treated a woman in such a possessive fashion—at least not until *after* they'd become lovers—bypassing any pretense of civility or seduction entirely. And yet somehow, at the same time, he'd known she wouldn't lambaste him.

It was as if his hand simply *belonged* there on her. And she knew it too.

You're getting fanciful, Keltar. Next you'll be thinking she's your one true mate.

According to Keltar legend, each Druid born into the clan was destined for a soul mate, a perfect match in heart and mind, as well as body, coming together with an explosive, incendiary passion that could not be denied. If the Keltar male exchanged the sacred Druid binding vows with his true love, and his mate willingly returned them, they could bind their souls together for all eternity, in this life and forever beyond. The vows linked them inextricably. 'Twas said if a Keltar gave the vows and they were not returned, he would be forever incomplete, missing a part of his heart, aching for the love of a woman he could never have, eternally bound to her, through this life and all his future existence, whether in the cycle of rebirth, heaven, hell, or even an eternal Unseelie prison. *If aught must be lost . . . the legendary vows began, 'twill be my life for yours. . .*

He snorted derisively. He had no life to give.

Very little left of a soul.

Not much honor, either, if one wanted to go further into the oath. Which he didn't.

“What?” she asked, wondering why he'd snorted.

He looked down at her. She was glancing askance up at him, her head tipped back. Her short glossy black curls glistened beneath the hotel lights, her creamy skin glowed with a kiss of sun-gold—the lass liked the outdoors—and the expression in her eyes managed somehow to be curious, irritated, worried, and determined, all at the same time.

Just looking up at him like that, she took his breath away. And he wasn't the kind of man that happened to easily. It was more than what she looked like that did it to him—it was the woman *inside* the lush package.

Jessica St. James was a handful of a woman; precisely the kind he'd so long ago

hungered to find. Scholarly, learned, she possessed spine and sauciness and independence of will. In the ninth century it had gotten to the point where he would have positively welcomed a temper tantrum from a woman, even if it had been completely unfounded—he would have appreciated *any* show of backbone—but as laird of the castle since birth, and heir to the ways of Druidry, virtually all he'd gotten from the lasses from a tender age on was obedience, deference, and awe. *Aye, milord. If it please you, milord. How may I serve you, milord? Is the wine to your liking, milord? May I fetch you anything—anything at all—milord?* And it had only worsened as he'd aged and become a formidably powerful man, sorcerer, and warrior.

He'd found himself increasingly drawn to more mature women, like this one. He suspected she had a good quarter century to her name. In his century she would have, like as not, had three or four babes and lost a few husbands by this time in her life. He preferred women who'd lived a good bit, women whom the passage of years had deepened and made more interesting. He liked to toop—bloody hell, did he ever!—but he also liked to be able to talk when the tooping was at a temporary hiatus.

This woman was certainly interesting. Beyond his compelling. Feisty and sexy and looking up at him with an enticing sheen on her plump lower lip.

He ducked his head and tasted her.

She was soft, silky, and utterly delectable. He nipped her lower lip gently, then brushed his mouth lightly against hers, savoring the sweet friction. He didn't push to deepen the kiss; there would be time later for scorchingly intense kisses. He contented himself for the now with a purely hedonistic, lazy taste of her. Moving soft and slow, lulling her into him. When he felt her body melting forward, he pulled away with a slow, erotic tug of her lower lip.

She stared up at him with a startled, searching expression, her lips parted, the lower one slightly puffed out.

His mouth tingled from the touch. He wondered if she felt it too. Wondered what she was thinking, feeling.

He stretched his senses and probed, suspecting deep in his bones it wouldn't work. If Voice had no effect on her, he highly doubted deep-listening would.

Deep-listening was the Druid art of reading the minds and hearts of others, and

was another of his greatest skills. Nay, that wasn't quite right. He excelled at all Druid skills. He always had.

He was an anomaly: the only Keltar ever to have been born with the full power of *all* of his ancestors, combined and compounded; an abnormality of nature; an anathema in an otherwise ancient, honorable, and predictable bloodline. While his da had excelled at healing, and his granda had been adept at predicting the seasons for the sowing and reaping, and his uncle had been highly skilled in both Voice and alchemy, Cian had been born with all those talents a hundredfold, plus abilities no Keltar had ever displayed before. 'Twas much of why he'd ended up trapped in the Dark Glass.

Too much power for one man. Pull back, Cian, his mother used to say, with troubled eyes. *One day you'll go too far.*

And indeed he had. He'd coveted the Dark Hallows himself, even knowing they bore the innately corruptive essence of black magyck, and that no man could own one and remain unchanged. Still, he'd hungered, just as Lucan had, for ever-greater power; but where Lucan had been perfectly willing to embrace evil, Cian's error had been that he'd arrogantly believed himself *incapable* of being corrupted or defeated by either man or magyck.

How wrong he'd been.

But that was another time, a long-ago story, and one best forgotten.

She was now.

He opened himself, focusing his senses, probed gently at her.

Nothing. He probed harder. Silence. Utter and absolute.

Centering, he *pounded* at Jessica St. James, a battering ram at the castle gates of her mind.

Not a hint of an emotion. Not a whisper of a thought.

Astonishing.

To test himself, he fired a questing arrow at the man arranging for the room. He flinched back hastily. The desk clerk was a miserable man. His wife had recently left him for one of his best friends. Cian swallowed, trying to scrape the foul

taste of the man's despair from his tongue. Despair served no one well. He wanted to shake him and say, *Fight, you fool. Fight for her. Never cede the battle. Never yield the day.*

"Doona give up, man," Cian hissed.

The desk clerk glanced up, looking startled.

"You can't just let her walk away," he growled. "She's your *wife*."

The clerk's eyes narrowed, flickered uneasily. "Who are you? Do I know you?" he said defensively.

"What?" Jessica said beside him. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. Forget it." To the desk clerk he said, "*Be at ease.*" It wasn't his place to save the world. Well, mayhap it was, but he knew what must be done, and it wasn't this.

With a soft snort of exasperation beside him, Jessica accepted a packet from the once-again submissive desk clerk, twitched that sweet bottom of hers, and stalked off toward two huge burnished-gold doors in the wall. She cast a glance back over her shoulder at him, and her expression could not have more clearly said: *Well, come on, you great, big, overbearing brute. I don't like you one bit, but we're stuck together.*

Cian admired the view for a moment, before picking up the mirror and loping off to join her.

Twenty days with this woman.

Mayhap, somewhere, some divinity in which he'd not believed, believed in him. Believed he would redeem himself and was rewarding him in advance.

She stopped at the doors. Yawning, she stretched her arms over her head, arched her back, and twisted from side to side as if stretching out her spine.

Bloody hell, the woman was a woman in all the right places!

Who cared the why of things?

She was *his* for the next twenty days.

Jessi sat at the cherry writing desk in room 2112, hooking up her laptop, scowling into the small wall mirror that hung above it, wondering why hotels always put mirrors above writing desks. Who wanted to look at themselves while writing? Apparently a lot of people must, because every hotel she'd been in had pretty much the same setup: closet inside the door on the left; bathroom inside the door on the right (or vice versa); first bed facing a writing desk with requisite mirror hung above it; a small table between the beds sporting clock radio and phone; second bed facing a TV armoire/dresser; and, at the far wall, a small table and two chairs sat before a wall of windows.

This room was no different, though a cut above some she'd been in, with merlot-and-champagne carpet, patterned with a gold diamond design, walls papered in textured ivory with gold embellishments at the moldings, beds topped with crisp ivory linens and champagne comforters, the windows hung with billowy wine drapes.

Behind her, Cian MacKeltar was taking a shower, beyond the closed bathroom door.

She'd closed the door.

She'd also closed her eyes when he'd dropped his kilt right in front of her. Which wasn't to say that she was a prude and hadn't stared at him through the glass of the shower enclosure when she'd firmly shut the door a few moments later. She had.

The moment they'd entered the hotel room, his gaze had gone instantly to the double king beds. So had hers, and there'd been one of those intensely tense moments where people either jumped on each other or got as far away from each other as they could.

She'd done a little crab-scuttle sideways, nearly sidling right back out into the hall. He'd smiled faintly, mockingly, at her, then stepped past her and thoroughly

scanned the entire room before positioning the mirror against the far wall, facing the entry door. She'd not missed that it also faced the beds, but was refusing to ponder it overlong.

For a moment she'd thought he was going to kiss her again, but, as he'd walked back toward her, his gaze had swept past her to the bathroom.

Christ, he'd exclaimed, 'tis a modern garderobe! I couldn't see beyond the door to the one in Lucan's study, though I've seen pictures. . . . He'd trailed off wonderingly.

Is that where he kept you . . . er, the mirror hung? In his study? How strange his existence must have been inside a mirror! She couldn't begin to fathom it.

Aye. Though I've seen most modern inventions in books and the like in his study, I've not had the opportunity to examine the real things.

She'd been about to give him a quick demonstration—anything to get away from those beds—but he'd plunged right into things, just as he had in the car, taking command, twisting handles and turning knobs, squirting little bottles of shampoo and conditioner until the room had been a steam sauna, scented of perfumed toiletries.

Does this hostelry contain a kitchen and serving wenches, lass? he'd paused long enough in his explorations to ask.

She'd nodded.

Command us a feast, woman. I'm famished. Meat. Much meat. And wine.

When he'd unfastened his wrist cuffs, she should have gotten the hint.

Without further ado, he'd dropped his kilt. Had stood there, utterly unself-conscious, wearing nothing but a leather sheath strapped to one heavily muscled thigh, casing a heavily jewel-encrusted knife. Doffing that, too, he'd placed it high on the shower stall's edge and stepped beneath the spray.

Pulse suddenly jumping in her throat, she'd turned sharply away and squeezed her eyes shut.

She could still taste him on her lips. The kiss he'd given her in the lobby had stunned her.

And scorched her right down to her toes. He'd not pushed for tongue, or tried to grab a breast the instant he'd thought he'd gotten her distracted with a kiss. No, he'd kissed her lazily, without touching her anywhere else at all, as if he had all the time in the world, brushing his firm, full, sexy lips back and forth over hers, gently sucking her lower lip.

She'd actually melted into the egotistical Neanderthal, had felt her lips parting.

Logic, reason, and awareness of current events had vanished from her mind as abruptly and completely as if someone had just vacuumed her brain out through her ear.

It was his gentleness that had gotten her, she'd decided on the way up in the elevator. It had surprised her, that was all. It was just that she'd not expected such a soft touch from such a hard-bodied, aggressive man. She'd not been prepared for it, any more than she had been for him to get butt-naked in front of her.

And, Crimeny, what a butt . . .

When she'd opened her eyes and turned back, she'd stared though the steamy glass at him—all six and a half magnificent naked feet of him.

Powerful muscles shaped his long legs and massive thighs, his ass was tight, perfectly formed, and packed with more sweet muscle. She loved a good butt on a man! Too many guys had none at all. Both legs and butt were dusted with fine, silky dark hair; he wasn't one of those lady-killer bodybuilders or models that shaved—he was a man's man, and proud of it. More dark hair dusted his forearms and beneath his arms.

He'd lathered himself up and begun scrubbing beneath the steamy spray. As his powerful hands moved over his body, prime, sleek muscle rippled beneath his slick, golden skin.

She'd been so engrossed, watching him wash himself, that when he'd squirted conditioner in his hand and closed a fist around himself, she'd continued dazedly watching. Not until he'd begun to rhythmically slip his hand up and down had she realized what she was watching him do.

Eyes snapping wide, she'd jerked her gaze to his face. His gaze had been locked on her face, his eyes narrowed, his gaze dark and hot. He'd flashed her a sexy,

wicked smile that had been both invitation and challenge, catching the tip of his tongue between his teeth.

She'd backed hastily out and slammed the door.

The man was *seriously* hung.

An insane, utterly-uncaring-of-consequences part of her had wanted nothing more than to go right back in there, strip, get in the shower with him, push his hand away, and replace it with hers.

Get a grip, Jessi, she'd rebuked herself firmly. *And not on mirror-man's dick.*

After shutting him in the bathroom and gulping a few steadying breaths, she'd gone to the phone and ordered room service, putting it also on her credit card.

"Why not?" she muttered to her reflection over the top of her laptop. "I may as well charge with impunity." The way things were going, she probably wouldn't live long enough to have to pay it off anyway. She made a face at herself in the mirror. It had been a long day and she was showing signs of the strain. Her makeup was as good as gone, her stubborn cowlicks were acting up, and her clothes were rumpled.

Plucking a tissue from a box on the desk, she dabbed at the remnants of mascara smudged on her lashes and ran a hand through her short glossy curls.

People often told her she looked like a curvier version of the girl who'd played Virginia, the heroine in *The 10th Kingdom*, and she supposed she did—after Virginia had gotten her hair whacked off by the wolfman. After the gypsies had cursed her for setting their poor birds free. Jessi would have set the poor birds free too. Not that her hair looked like it had been whacked off or anything. She got it trimmed every six weeks down at the Beauty Training Academy, and they did a pretty good job for six bucks.

She narrowed her eyes at her reflection. Breasts. They were undoubtedly her best feature. Some people got great nails and hair, some people got beautiful smiles or pretty eyes, some people got skinny little perfect beach-butts, those disgustingly ideal ones that actually *stayed* in bikini bottoms. She'd gotten good breasts. It wasn't that they were so big. Frankly, she didn't think they were. It was just that they were really round and really high and really perky, and she had a short neck (which was why she wore her hair short—the girls at the Beauty

Academy said it made her neck look longer), and sometimes even *she* thought her breasts looked fake in certain tops, but they weren't. They were real. Perhaps a bit too enthusiastically perky, but she figured she should enjoy that while she could, because she fully comprehended complex equations like gravity plus time.

The reflection of the glowing red face of the clock on the bedside table suddenly drew her attention, blinking as the hour rolled over.

4:00 A.M.

She stared at it in the mirror, aghast, realizing that in three hours and twenty minutes, classes would begin for the day. On Thursdays, she taught four one-hundred-level anthropology courses.

Or she'd used to. She certainly wouldn't be teaching any today.

She considered calling in sick, but decided it was wiser not to. When this was over, she'd figure out what kind of story to tell. She might be able to get away with claiming to have been forcibly abducted and fully exonerate herself. Which meant if she called in sick now, it would make her look like a liar later. *I know it's odd for a kidnapper to let his kidnappee call in sick, but he was an odd kidnapper.* Right. That would go over like a ton of bricks.

Exhaling gustily, she returned her attention to her laptop and plugged it into the hotel line. She'd decided to check her E-mail while he was showering, partly in a no-doubt-pointless bid for the comfort of routine, but also to keep her mind off sex, which, with him around, was like trying not to think about chocolate while sitting in a person-sized fondue pot of the dark, creamy stuff, surrounded by flowering cacao trees.

Her inbox was filled with the usual: newsletters to which she subscribed to stay apprised of significant developments in her field; E-mails from students in the undergrad classes she T.A.'d, filled with impressively creative excuses as to why they should be the exception to the rule, forgiven their: a) absenteeism; b) failure to appear for an exam; c) late paper. The entertaining and inventive pleas for leniency were followed by spam spam and more spam, and finally, the one she liked best—the Naked Man of the Week pictures from her cyberfriends at RBL Romantica.

She made short work of her correspondence, shooting the newsletters to a

suspend folder for later perusal, denying any and all excuses/pleas for extensions that didn't involve a death in the family, reporting the spam, and perusing the Naked Man pictures appreciatively before setting one of them as her desktop background.

She was about to log off when a new E-mail popped in. She scanned the sender's ID.

Myrddin@Drui.com.

She didn't know a *Myrddin@Drui.com* and had a phobia about viruses. If something happened to her laptop, a new one wasn't in the budget. There was no topic in the subject line, which meant, according to her stringent guidelines, there was no place for it but the Trash folder.

As she slid the pointer over it, she got an instant bone-deep chill. She whisked her fingers over the mouse pad, jerking the pointer away.

Slid it back again. An immediate, painful, bitter chill licked up her hand.

She shivered, jerked the pointer off.

Oh, that was just too weird.

She frowned, thinking about the way it had arrived. Had an E-mail *ever* just popped into her inbox when she'd been sitting idle on the inbox page?

Not that she could remember. Sometimes when she was refreshing a page, or reentering the inbox, new ones showed up, but one had never popped in like that when she was just sitting static on the page.

Gingerly, she slid the pointer back over the topic line: **NO SUBJECT**. Grimacing at the immediate sensation that her hand had been plunged, dripping wet, into a Subzero freezer, she *clicked* on it hard and fast and yanked her fingers from the mouse pad.

She pressed her palm shakily to her cheek. It was as cold as ice.

Wide-eyed, she stared at the screen. The E-mail contained three short lines.

Return the mirror immediately.

Contact Myrddin@Drui.com for instructions.

You have twenty-four hours.

That was all it said. There was nothing else on the screen but for a line of nonsensical symbols and shapes at the very bottom.

As she scanned them, a sudden shadow seemed to fall over the hotel room. The bedside clock dimmed, the overhead light in the little entrance foyer hummed, and the ivory walls took on a sickly yellowish hue.

And as clearly as if a man were standing in the room with her, she heard a man's deep, cultured baritone say:

“Or you will die, Jessica St. James.”

Whipping around, she scanned the room.

There was no one there.

Beyond the bathroom door, the shower still ran, and Cian MacKeltar still splashed.

She sat perfectly still, brittle as glass, waiting to see if her disembodied guest had anything further to add.

The moments ticked by.

Her shoulders drooped and she stared morosely at her reflection.

He'd called her Jessica St. James. Freaking *everybody* knew her name.

Lucan removed his hand from the screen.

She was gone. But for a moment there, he'd had her.

Vibrant and young. By his measure, so very, very young.

Beyond that—an enigma. Concealed by shadows he couldn't penetrate. Who was this woman with Cian MacKeltar?

Usually if he was able to secure a connection, he could deep-listen, probe, and get more than the general sense of her he'd gotten, which was why he'd attempted the contact to begin with. He'd wanted to see if there was anything he could learn about her and pass on to Eve so she could expedite matters.

People were so concerned about viruses and identity theft, and so oblivious to the true risks of plugging themselves into the World Wide Web, wiring themselves to any and everything that might be out there, hungry, waiting. They worried about cons and killers, sexual molesters enticing their children. They had no notion how thoroughly they could be violated, probed, and coerced by a skilled practitioner of the Dark Arts across a phone line.

Still, he'd not gotten far with this woman. The moment he'd pressed at Ms. St. James, he'd encountered some sort of barrier.

Flipping open Roman's file, which contained the dead assassin's thorough evaluation of his targets, including photos, addresses—both real and cyber—vehicle registration, birth certificate, passport, lines of credit, available funds, and other pertinent facts, he studied Ms. St. James's picture again.

Her driver's license supplied her vital stats. Twenty-four. Height: five feet six inches. Weight: 135 pounds. Eyes: green. Hair: black. Organ donor: no.

She was a lovely woman.

He had no doubt Cian MacKeltar wanted her. The Highlander would be as fascinated by her resistance to probing as was Lucan. He and the Highlander weren't quite as different as the condescending bastard liked to believe.

Closing the file, he punched in a series of numbers on his phone and conveyed a change in plans to Eve's associate: The mirror was still the priority, but make every effort to bring Ms. St. James in alive.

He'd enjoy cracking her open and studying her. He'd not been intrigued by a woman for a very long time.

He would do it while the Keltar watched from his powerless perch high up on his study wall.

"Oh, now *that's* just not going to work," Jessi said flatly when Cian stalked out

of the bathroom. She hopped off the bed and moved to regard him from a safer vantage, over near the window. Sitting on a bed with that man in the room just didn't seem wise. "You go back in there and get dressed," she ordered.

Funny thing was, she'd just been placing bets with herself about what condition the archaic Highlander would exit in: kilt-clad and modest, in a towel and semimodest, or in-your-face nude and on the predatory prowl.

She'd decided on in-your-face nude. She owed herself five bucks.

He placed his thigh sheath and jeweled blade on the writing desk, wearing two towels: one at his waist and the other wrapped turban-style around his head. It was barely better than nude. In fact, it only made her want to peel those offending towels away.

As if reading her mind, he ducked his head and unwound the first towel, sponging the excess water from his dark mane. Righting himself, he tossed his hair back over his shoulders, metallic beads *clinking*. Tiny rivulets of water ran down over his magnificent tattooed chest, a thin channel of it slithered over that tattooed nipple. Muscles bunched and rippled in his tattooed biceps.

She moistened her lips, wondering what on earth was wrong with her. She'd never had such an intense reaction to a man before.

She had only to look at him to get all shaky-feeling inside. And it wasn't as if she'd never dated a good-looking man before. She had. Kenny Dirisio had been a Grade-A-Italian-Stallion-Extraordinaire. Even brainy Ginger, who was every bit as focused and driven as she was, had said, "Jessi-chick, take my advice, drop a few courses this term and hop on that one. They don't come along like that often."

But she hadn't—hopped on him, that was. In fact, she'd volunteered to teach another seminar and they'd broken up over it, and now she knew why. While her brain had appreciated Kenny's incredible looks, her body had just never quite kicked in. It never really had with any of the guys she'd dated.

With Cian MacKeltar, however, despite the fact that her brain wanted nothing to do with him, her body wanted to do everything with him that was possible between a man and a woman. Her body had done more than kicked in; it was stoking up the oven for the baking of little MacKeltar buns.

With a man that called a mirror “home.” This was not good.

“Did you not send for food, Jessica?”

Jessi blinked again, trying to refocus her thoughts. “Yes, but it won’t be here for a little while yet. Look, I’ve been thinking, what’s your plan, anyway?”

“To bed you.”

“No, I mean, your plan that might actually *work*.” She bared her teeth in a cool masquerade of a smile.

“Ah, *that* plan. That would be to cross this room right now and kiss you until you start tearing off your clothing and begging me to f—”

“No, that’s not the one I meant, either,” she said hastily.

How in the world had he moved that fast?

One instant he was across the room, the space of two beds separating them; the next, one big hand was cupping her chin, tipping her head back, the other hot and possessive on her waist. The man was lethally fast. Which boded well for protection—from everyone but him.

He stared down at her with smoldering intensity. He lowered his mouth slowly, lazily, never breaking eye contact with her. Up close, he was beyond gorgeous. Those whisky eyes shimmered with golden depths and were framed by thick dark lashes. His skin was tawny-velvet, darkly stubbled. His lips were sensual, pink and firm, and curved in the hint of a smile.

“Tell me not to kiss you, Jessica. Tell me right now. And best you make me believe you mean it,” he warned softly, a breath from her lips.

“Don’t kiss me.” She wet her lips.

“Try again,” he said flatly.

“Don’t kiss me.” She swayed toward his body, a magnet to steel.

“Try again,” he hissed. “And best ’ware, woman, ’tis your last chance.”

Jessi took a deep breath. “Don’t.” Another deep breath. “Kiss me?”

He laughed, a cocky, rich purr of a sound.

Crimeny, she thought dismally, as he lowered his sexy dark head toward hers, even *she'd* heard the wrong punctuation there.

Even though she knew it was coming, Jessi wasn't prepared for Cian MacKeltar's kiss. *Nothing* could have prepared her for the mind-blowing, sizzling intensity of it.

This was no gentle brush of a kiss like the one he'd given her in the lobby. This was the real deal. Intense and demanding, it was every bit as raw and unapologetically carnal as it was seductive.

Gripping a fistful of her short dark curls, the ninth-century Highlander slanted his mouth over hers. He cupped her cheek with one big hand and pressured the corner of her lips with his thumb, nudging them apart. The moment she yielded, he sealed his lips over hers, opening wider, deepening the kiss, taking complete possession of her mouth, obliterating any lingering protest she might have thought to make.

It was a dominant kiss, an expert kiss, the kiss of a man who knew he was a man, liked being one, and knew exactly what he was doing. This was no college boy kissing her, no young grad student toeing the lukewarm line between desire and political correctness. This was a man who was one-hundred-percent okay with lust, who suffered no hesitation or inhibitions.

It was exactly the kind of kiss, she realized dimly, for which she'd always been waiting. But until now, she'd not been able to define exactly what it was she'd been missing, what she'd been holding out for. She was struck by the sudden realization that the problem with her boyfriends was that they'd been just that—boyfriends, with the emphasis on “boy.”

Cian MacKeltar was a man—and a formidable force to be reckoned with sexually. She was, quite simply, out of her league with him.

She was struck by another sudden realization then: that she was going to be very, very lucky if she managed to walk out of that hotel room, at whatever point in the future they departed, the same way she'd walked in. A virgin, though she'd

never admit it to any of her friends. Nobody was a virgin anymore, and peer pressure could get intense if people thought you were.

Personally, she'd never thought it was anyone else's business whether or not she was. Only her own, and whatever man she chose to share it with. Her mom might liberally encourage baby-having, but she'd also encouraged a healthy degree of self-respect. *Pick carefully, girls*, Lilly St. James had advised her daughters. *There are a lot of duds out there*. As her mom was currently between husbands number four and five, Jessi figured she should know.

"Christ, lass, you taste sweet," he purred.

She shivered with pleasure as he sucked her lower lip into his mouth, nipped it, then closed his mouth hard over hers, plunging deep. He kissed like a man who hadn't had the luxury in—oh, maybe a thousand years or so—exploiting it for all it was worth, savoring all the subtle, sensual variations. Luring one moment, assaulting the next, and it made her crazy. He kissed like he wanted to devour her, maybe crawl inside her skin. He kissed like he was fucking her mouth, this sinfully gorgeous Highlander with his hot wet tongue and his hard, tattooed body. He kissed so thoroughly and possessively that she wasn't Jessi anymore, she was a woman and he was a man, and she existed because he was kissing her and if he stopped, she might stop being.

She had no idea how they ended up on the floor.

One moment she was in his arms, being kissed senseless—literally, apparently—and the next she was flat on her back beneath his still shower-damp, big, powerful body, her nipples so hard they were poking through both her bra and sweater against his bare chest, with the steely bar of his erection jammed against her stomach.

And she wasn't entirely certain, but she didn't think she was feeling a towel between them anymore. And holy cow, the man was huge.

Dazedly, she wondered what in the world she thought she was doing—even as she buried her fingers in the wet tangle of his hair.

More kisses, soft and slow, hot and hard. She was drowning in man, in the taste and scent and feel of him. Her hands slipped of their own accord down the thick column of his neck, over the muscled ridges of his shoulders.

She barely noticed when he shifted position so that his legs were straddling hers, until he fit himself snugly in the vee of her thighs, and his thick ridge nudged the inseam of her jeans against her clitoris with delicious friction. She jerked at the raw intimacy of it.

When he cupped a hand beneath her bottom, tilted her hips, and began a slow, erotic bump-and-grind that was as old as Mankind itself, a distant part of her mind began sounding a clamorous alarm. But with each slow, powerful thrust of his cock, that inner alarm grew fainter and fainter, as Jessi slipped irresistibly deeper beneath Cian MacKeltar's seductive spell.

When he rucked her sweater up to her ribs and began tracing a path from her bottom to her breasts, slowly, lingeringly, as if committing the subtle shape of each dip and turn to memory, she whimpered into his mouth, hungry to feel those big hands all over her bare body. Everywhere he was touching her, she felt as if a low-voltage electrical current was pulsing beneath her skin, jolting each nerve ending to delicious, tingling awareness. When he closed a hand over one of her breasts, heat shot straight down to her belly and lower still, and she dug her nails into his shoulders, arching hungrily up to meet his next thrust.

He sucked in a shallow hiss of a breath, and suddenly he was working at the fly of her jeans, and then the air was cool on her bare skin as he pushed her jeans and panties down. That faint alarm was sounding again, more loudly, but he was kissing her so heatedly, so passionately and—

—abruptly she was sucking air like a fish out of water.

Alone on the floor.

She blinked. Heavens, but the man could move fast! She sat up, looking dazedly around. "Where did you go?" she said breathlessly.

"Behind you, woman," came the tight, furious reply.

She glanced over her shoulder. He was inside the mirror, propped in the corner, breathing hard, like he'd been running a race. She was panting herself, she realized. Her lips were swollen, she had the sting of a rug burn beginning on her spine, and her nipples throbbed.

Why was he in the mirror? For that matter, *how* had he gotten in the mirror? She gaped at him, bewildered.

“It reclaims me after a time,” he said flatly.

She continued gaping. “W-without preamble?” she stammered. “Just like that?”

“Aye. ’Twas not my choice to leave you in such a fashion.” His gaze dropped sharply and fixed there. “Och, Jessica, you’ve a beautiful ass. Nigh worth living a thousand years to see.”

His words drew her awareness to the fact that she was sitting on the floor, between the TV armoire and the bed, facing the entry door, her bare bottom pointed at the mirror, glancing over her shoulder at him, her sweater rucked up, jeans and panties down around her knees.

The cold reality of reason returned.

Oh, God, what had she almost just *done*? She gaped at the mirror, stunned.

In a matter of mere minutes, she’d been down on the floor, with her jeans and panties around her knees! A few heated kisses—and she’d been about to have sex with a man she barely knew. An arrogant, throwback of a man, at that. Who lived in a mirror. And in the midst of such dire straits, to boot!

This wasn’t like her at all. Was she freaking *nuts*?

Shocked and appalled at herself, Jessi stumbled to her feet, tugging at her jeans. Her panties got twisted and her jeans got stuck partway up, just beneath her butt. She yanked but they didn’t yield. Only her butt did— she felt it jiggle.

He made a choking sound. “Sweet Christ, woman, you’re killing me!”

Cheeks flaming, she shot a scowl over her shoulder at him as she bunny-hopped, bare-bottomed, into the bathroom.

A groan followed her.

“Stop looking at my butt,” she hissed fiercely.

She could hear his laughter, even through the closed door.

Hours later, Jessi awakened so hungry that her stomach was cramping.

Rolling over on the miserably lumpy hotel bed, she glanced at the clock. No wonder she was hungry—she hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours!

The room service she'd ordered earlier hadn't come, for whatever reason: Either they'd tried to deliver it while she'd been stretched beneath Cian MacKeltar's rock-hard body, deaf, dumb, and blind to all but his erotic assault on her senses; or they'd lost her order; or it had arrived so late that she'd been sleeping. Since she rarely got a full night's sleep, she tended to drop off the moment her head touched the pillow, and slept like the proverbial dead, sprawled flat on her back, arms outflung.

After the near-sex-on-the-floor debacle, Jessi had gone in the bathroom and stayed in there awhile, cooling down and trying to think things through. But mostly cooling down—the man threw off serious sexual heat—because by then she'd simply been too exhausted to make much sense of anything.

When she'd finally come out, she'd stiffly informed the mirror to *go away and let me sleep and don't you dare wake me unless my life is in danger. And I do not want to talk about what just happened. Not now. Maybe never.*

He'd laughed softly. *As you wish, Jessica*, he'd replied.

Her stomach sounded a long, growling, painful protest.

Fumbling for the light switch on the wall sconce above the bed table, she turned it on, picked up the phone, and pressed the button for room service. As she was placing her order for a double cheeseburger, fries, and a large Coke, the mirror rumbled:

“Quadruple all of that. And if there's naught sweet, add something.”

Shrugging, she did so, assuming he'd eat it whenever he was able to come out of the mirror again.

Until the mirror had reclaimed him, it hadn't occurred to her to wonder why he'd gone back in once she'd let him out that first night he'd killed the assassin. In her own defense, she'd had a lot of other things on her mind. Now she knew the answer. Apparently, he had no choice. Though he could be released from the mirror by the chanting of a spell, he couldn't stay out long.

That was a problem. Exactly how did he plan to protect her from behind a pane

of silvered glass?

Replacing the phone in the cradle, she scowled at him. God, the man was beautiful. Every time she looked at him, he took her breath away. Made her forget all the important things she should be thinking about. She shook her head, striving for levelheadedness. It was time for more answers. “How often and for how long can you be released from that glass?”

He leaned back against something in the mirror that she couldn’t see, folded his arms over his chest, and crossed his booted feet at the ankles. She narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute, how did you get your clothes back in there?”

“I’ve had centuries to test the glass. Though the elements comprising it are beyond my fathoming, I’ve learned to exploit it after a fashion. ’Twas designed to hold humans, not inanimate objects, and I’ve learned to summon in inert items that reside in my field of vision.”

She blinked, glancing around. Kilt—gone. Boots—gone. Even his thigh sheath and knife were gone. Apparently he’d drawn those items back in while she’d slept. Oh, she had a million questions about the nature of that artifact! But first things first: her continued survival. “So?” she prodded. “How often?”

He shrugged. “Try again now.”

Jessi drew a deep breath. She really didn’t want him out of the mirror at the moment. She wasn’t prepared to deal with him in the flesh—all that rippling, sexy, horny male flesh, at that—just yet. Still, she needed to understand the parameters of their situation. She recited the chant to release him.

Nothing happened.

He inclined his head. “I didn’t think so. I cannot answer your question precisely. I can tell you only what has occurred in the past. On occasion, when Lucan wished something of me, he afforded me a temporary freedom. Once, several centuries ago, he released me on four consecutive days. Each day I was allotted a different interval by the glass. One day I had but a few hours, another five or six, the fourth day I had the entirety of a day and a night. There is no predicting it.”

“So, you can come out every day, for at least a while,” she clarified.

“Aye.”

“Which means you probably can’t come out again until tomorrow morning?”

Another shrug. “I doona ken. You should continue trying at frequent intervals.”

“How do you intend to protect me if you can’t stay out of that glass?” she said peevishly.

“Lass, we need only evade Lucan for a number of days. Twenty more, to be exact. Scarce any time at all. I assure you, I will keep you safe and well until then.”

“ ‘Twenty days’? Why only twenty?” That didn’t sound so bad. She hadn’t known there was a time limit to how long her life was going to be screwed up, and it was a relatively short one. Surely she could get her life back on track after only twenty out-of-control days, if things really would be resolved by then. She was grateful that she’d had the foresight not to call in sick. Her odds for survival and a return to normalcy were suddenly looking considerably brighter. One whopper of a good story might take care of things. It might not even have to be half as inventive as some of those her students tried to feed her.

“Because the Compact that holds me bound to the Dark Glass requires that a tithe of purest gold be passed through the mirror every century to reaffirm the Unseelie indenture. The next tithe is due this Hallows’ Eve, on the thirty-first day of October, at midnight.”

Crimeny. Tithes, Compacts, indentures: Anytime she began thinking about resuming a normal life, she was reminded that she was currently up to her eyebrows in a fairy-tale world of spells and curses.

And the scary part was that it was all beginning to sound somewhat reasonable to her. The longer she interacted with a man who lived inside a mirror, the more inured she became to the strangeness of subsequent oddities. His existence was so inexplicable in and of itself that it seemed pointless to squabble over further inexplicabilities. Though she never would have believed it, magic existed. There was proof of it right in front of her eyes. Arguments over, case closed.

Shaking her head wonderingly, she pushed off the bed—she’d slept fully clothed but for shoes and socks—and went to stand in front of the mirror. She studied the fabulous frame with its odd symbols, stroking the cool gold of it, trailing her hand down over the silvery glass.

Inside the mirror, Cian raised his hand, too, and traced the path of her passage, making it appear as though their fingertips met. She felt only cold glass.

When the tips of her fingers passed over the black stain at the edge, she snatched them hastily away. It had felt icy, just like that strange E-mail, and it had seemed to almost . . . well, kind of . . . *stick* to her skin like a psychic leech as she'd pulled away, as if reluctant to release her. She made a mental note to tell him about the Myrddin-guy and his goose-bumpy E-mail. But first, more questions.

“ ’Tis because it is an Unseelie Hallow, lass,” he said softly.

“What?”

“The chill. Dark power is cold. Light power is warm. A Seelie artifact exudes a gentle heat. Mere rubbings of a page from the Unseelie Dark Book suck the heat from a man’s body. ’Tis said handling the Dark Book itself turns a man into something no longer human, day by day, robbing him of all remnants of inner warmth and light.”

Jessi absorbed the information but refused to get sidetracked from the issue at hand. She needed to regain a measure of control that could only be achieved via a thorough understanding of her immediate situation, and as far as she could see, this Dark Book, whatever it was, had nothing to do with her problems.

“So, all we have to do is keep you away from this Lucan person until after the tithe is due, and the spell will be broken? We just need to hide for three weeks? That’s all?”

“Aye.”

“Then what—once the spell is broken and you’re free?” Could he get rid of this man who wanted her dead? Assure her return to a nice, normal life?

He inhaled deeply, his whisky gaze gleaming with sudden, chilling brutality. When he spoke, his voice was hard. “Then you’ll never have to worry about Lucan Trevayne again. No one will. This I swear.”

Jessi stepped back, in spite of herself. With those words, he’d transformed from sexy man to savage beast, lips drawn back in a silent snarl, nostrils flared, eyes narrowed and not quite sane. Madness born of a thousand-plus years of captivity flickered in those whisky depths, shadowy and cold as the inky stain on the

perimeter of the Dark Glass.

She swallowed. “You sound pretty sure of your ability to defeat him, considering that he’s the one that stuck you in the mirror,” she felt obligated to point out.

A wicked, feral smile curved his lips. “Ah, Jessica, I’ll win this time. Of that you may be certain,” he said with soft menace.

His words chilled her to the bone. There was such implacable surety in his voice, such savagery in his eyes, that she no longer entertained the slightest doubt whatsoever about Cian MacKeltar’s ability to keep her alive.

She had a feeling the man had a few tricks up his proverbial sleeves. Even stuck inside a mirror. Tricks she probably couldn’t begin to imagine. Again, she had that sense of something *more* in him.

Oh yes, one way or another, this man would keep her safe.

And how are you going to keep yourself safe from him?

Good question.

Twenty more days. And he could be released from the mirror for at least a portion of each day.

God help her, she had no idea.

Cian MacKeltar attracted her in a manner that defied logic or reason. Then again, she thought wryly, that shouldn’t surprise her too much, because *everything* about her current situation defied logic or reason. She was chagrined by the sudden sinking suspicion that her intact hymen was probably due less to her impressive moral fiber than to the fact that she’d simply never experienced such intense, brainless chemistry before. If she had, she highly doubted she’d have lasted so long.

“Room service!” The cheery call was accompanied by a sharp *rap-tap-tap* at the door.

Brightening, Jessi turned away from the mirror. “Thank goodness,” she said. “I’m starving.”

Cian eased back, just behind the silver, where he could still see but couldn’t be

seen.

As Jessica walked toward the door, his gaze fixed on her luscious little ass. He'd had that silken-skinned, sweet bottom in his hands only that morning, a cheek of it in each palm. He'd been about to make her his woman, fill her with his cock and pump deep inside her. He'd touched those heavy, round breasts, kissed those full lips, tasted the honeyed sweetness that was Jessica St. James. And soon he would taste the sweetness between her thighs, while he lapped and nibbled and sucked her to shuddering orgasm after orgasm.

A soft growl built in his throat. Christ, he loved to watch her move! Her stride was determined and purposeful, yet graceful and sexy. With a body like that, she couldn't help but be sexy. Her short dark curls only made her seem more womanly, showcasing the delicate, creamy nape of her neck, the fine bones of her shoulder blades, and the sweet slender bow of her spine.

I do not want to talk about what just happened, she'd snapped.

Fine with me, woman, he'd thought with a silent laugh and a shrug. They didn't need words.

Their bodies spoke the same language, used identical vocabulary.

Desire. Lust. Need.

He looked at her and something hot and possessive flexed inside his chest.

It wasn't about *wanting* to bed her. It was about answering an ancient, undeniable call to mate.

It was about raw, animal passion. It was about—

Food. Bloody hell. His mouth began to water. He smelled meat.

"You can put it here," Jessica was saying, gesturing to the table by the windows.

A slender, thirtyish woman with shoulder-length brown hair wheeled a tray into the room, pushing it down the narrow aisle between beds and furniture.

Red meat. She'd not ordered fish or fowl, bless the wench! It had been over a century since he'd eaten, and he wanted meat with blood. The last time Lucan had freed him, he'd managed to wolf down a meal of bread, cheese, and ale. To

his deprived palate it had been a feast of divinely varied flavors and textures, but it hadn't been rich, juicy, tender meat. That was a memory that had been tormenting him for more than 427 years.

Though inside the glass his existence was suspended and he suffered no bodily needs—no hunger, no thirst, no need to sleep or piss or bathe—that didn't mean he suffered no mental ones.

He hungered. Holy hell, did he hunger! He'd whiled away entire weeks at a time, conjuring the memories of the tastes and scents of his favorite foods.

Closing his eyes, he savored the aromas currently wafting past his mirror as the woman began unloading the cart.

He had no idea what tipped him off.

He decided later that mayhap the woman's intentions were so intense and finely focused that he'd inadvertently deep-listened, catching them even through the glass. Such had happened on occasion with Lucan, usually when his emotions had been strong because he'd been in a fury over one thing or another.

Whatever it was, Cian acted on it instantly, without hesitation.

His hand went to his thigh sheath.

Snapping his eyes open, he whipped his selvar free, hissed the chant to part the veil of silver.

And flung the eight-inch, razor-sharp blade, end over end, through the glass.

Jessi backed away from the room service lady, shaking her head from side to side, mouth open on a scream.

One moment she'd been making small talk with the hotel employee, the next something hot and wet and unexpected had sprayed her, splashing her face and hair, her sweater, even splattering her jeans. She'd squeezed her eyes protectively shut against it.

When she'd opened them, it had been to find the woman, standing, eyes wide and glazed, lips moving soundlessly.

With Cian MacKeltar's jewel-encrusted knife protruding from her throat.

Belatedly comprehending what had sprayed her, she'd almost thrown up. But when she'd opened her mouth, a scream came out instead.

"Jessica, you must stop screaming!" came the sharp command from inside the mirror.

She knew that, and she was going to any second now. Really.

The woman staggered back into the TV armoire, knocked her head against it with a solid *thud*, collapsed, and slid down. Her body jerked convulsively, and she went abruptly still, half-sitting, half-lying, hotel uniform twisted about her hips.

As Jessi stared in shock, blood suddenly bubbled between the woman's lips, and her eyes went eerily empty.

Oh, God, she was dead; the woman was *dead*!

Cian pounded on the inside of the mirror with his fists. "Stop screaming, Jessica! Bloody hell, listen to me, if you draw people to us, they'll think *you* killed her. No one will believe your story of a man in a mirror and I will not show myself.

I'll *let* you go to prison, Jessica!"

Jessi jerked, his harsh words a bracing slap in her face. She stopped screaming so abruptly it turned into a screeching hiccuping noise, then silence.

He was right.

If her screams drew neighboring guests to her room, she would be found covered with blood, in possession of a stolen artifact, with a dead woman on her floor—said woman having been killed by yet another artifact Jessi wouldn't be able to explain having in her possession.

She'd be arrested in a heartbeat.

And not just for theft, as she'd worried about earlier when leaving campus, but for murder.

And she couldn't see a thing he might have to gain by showing himself and taking the blame.

In fact, considering that all he wanted to do was to hide for another twenty days so he could have his millennium-old vengeance, he'd probably be *happy* to end up in the Chicago Police Department's stolen-goods/evidence lockup. He could hide really well there, under police protection. No, he certainly had no incentive to save her ass.

Shit, shit, shit.

She clamped her lips shut, unwilling to risk so much as another peep.

"Shut the door and bolt it, Jessica."

She scrambled over the bed so fast that she fell off the other side. She'd left the entry door cracked, with the security bolt flipped between door and frame when she'd let the woman in. Leaping up from the floor, she hurried to the door, eased it open only as far as necessary to flip the metal latch back in, ducking well back from the line of vision of anyone who might be beyond it, closed it, and secured the lock. She could hear voices murmuring down the hall and footfalls approaching.

She didn't bother stepping away from the door. Though she'd been screaming for only a few seconds, she had good lungs and knew how loud she'd been.

A few moments later there was a firm knock.

“Is everything all right in there, ma’am?” came a man’s worried voice. “We’re in the room a few doors down and heard you screaming.”

Her heart hammering against the wall of her chest, she took two slow, careful breaths. “Uh, yeah,” she managed, “I’m fine. I’m sorry I disturbed you.” She forced a shaky, self-deprecating laugh. “There was a spider in the shower and I have a touch of arachnophobia. I guess I kind of freaked out.” She injected what she hoped was a convincing note of embarrassment into her voice.

There was a silence, then the sound of soft male laughter. “My friends and I would be happy to take care of it for you, ma’am.”

Men. They could be so condescending sometimes, even when they thought they were only trying to be helpful. She’d never been afraid of spiders in her life. And if she was, that was still no reason to laugh at her. Dead bodies—*they* threw her. But she was no sissy about bugs. People couldn’t help what they were afraid of. One of her good friends, Cheryl Carroll, was afraid of flowers, and there was nothing funny about it.

“No, no,” she said hastily, “it’s all right, my husband took care of it.” *Say something*, she mouthed over her shoulder at Cian.

“All is well now,” Cian boomed. “ ’Twas good of you to inquire.”

She scowled at him. *All is well. ’Twas?* she echoed silently, wrinkling her nose. Could he have sounded more archaic?

At the sound of another man’s voice, a note of cordial reserve entered her would-be-savior’s tones. “You might want to call the front desk and let them know. There shouldn’t be any bugs in the rooms. My girlfriend hates spiders too.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks.” *Go. Away.*

As the footfalls faded down the hall, she sagged limply against the door. She made the mistake of rubbing her eyes and compounded it by looking at her hands.

Her lips parted. Breath rushed into her lungs, prelude to a scream.

“Doona *do* it, lass,” Cian hissed. “He won’t believe you twice.”

Pursing her lips, she forced the air back out in small, silent explosions. She puffed short, shallow bursts, as if breathing in a paper bag. *I am not going to scream. I am not going to scream.*

“Why did you kill her?” she asked a few minutes later, when she trusted herself to speak.

“Look in the woman’s hand. I cannot make out what it is, but she meant to harm you with it.”

Steeling herself, Jessi moved reluctantly back into the room and gazed down at the dead woman. Her left hand was closed around something. Jessi nudged it with her foot. A syringe spilled from her fingers and rolled across the blood-spattered carpet. Jessi shivered.

“Jessica, try to summon me out.”

Neither of them expected it to work. It didn’t.

“Remove the comforter from the bed and cover the body with it.”

Gingerly, she did so.

It didn’t help much. Instead of a dead body in the same room with her that she could see, now there was a dead body in the same room with her she *couldn’t* see, and that creeped her out even more. Everybody knew villains never really died. Just when you thought you were safe, they got up again, eyes terrifying abysses, arms sickly groping for you like in *Night of the Living Dead*.

“You will go bathe now, Jessica.”

She didn’t move. She wasn’t about to go off and get in the shower, only to end up having a *Psycho* moment.

“She’s dead, lass. I swear. She was human, nothing out of the ordinary. Now go bathe,” he said in a voice that brooked no resistance. “I will protect you. *Go.*”

After searching his burnt-scotch gaze a moment, Jessi went.

Near dawn on Friday, October thirteenth, Jessi stared into the mirror, blew out an

exasperated breath, and muttered the spell to release Cian for the gazillionth time.

It *finally* worked.

Hours had passed since the long, scalding shower she'd taken, using up two entire bars of those little pink soaps.

Cian had kept her occupied with tales of life in the ninth century. He'd told her of his seven doting sisters, his mother who tried to manage them all, of his eventual attempts to secure them worthy husbands.

He'd spoken in great, loving detail of his castle in the mountains, and of the rugged bens and sparkling burns surrounding it. It was obvious he'd adored his home, his family, and his clan.

He'd told her of the heather that grew wild along the hillsides and so fragrantly scented a fire; he spoke at length of the savory Scots meals that he'd been missing for centuries.

His words had brought the Highlands brilliantly to life in her mind's eye, and the constant purr of his deep rich burr had soothed. She knew he'd been trying to keep her from going nuts while killing time in a room with a dead body, and it had worked.

As the shock of yet another attempt on her life and Cian's swift dispatch of the would-be assassin faded, Jessi faced the cold, hard facts.

Fact: The woman had intended to kill her. Fact: One of them had to go. Fact: Jessi was glad it hadn't been her.

Problem: In a short time, she'd be slinking out of a room that had blood splattered all over it, leaving a dead body in it. Even if they somehow managed to get the body out of the room—and she couldn't see how they could possibly sneak it from the hotel without being seen—there was no way they could get rid of all the blood.

Fact: She was now a fugitive.

That was the fact that could make her nuts. PhD, life, future—all of it gone to hell.

What was she going to do now?

She had a sudden, horrible vision of herself at some point in the not-so-distant future, calling her mom from a strange, frightening foreign country where the beetles and roaches were the size of small rats, trying to assure Lilly St. James that she really hadn't done whatever the police were saying she'd done.

On top of it all, she didn't even have clothes to sneak out of the hotel in. Though she'd been able to get some of the blood out of her jeans, her sweater was a lost cause. Though her panties had been salvageable, her bra was not.

She could hardly walk out into downtown Chicago in the blanket she was wearing. One might be able to pull that kind of thing off in New York City, but not in Shy-town.

As brilliant golden light blazed from those mysterious runes on the frame, and the sensation of spatial distortion grated across her already frayed nerve endings, she tugged the blanket more securely around her.

She began to push herself up from where she'd been sitting, cross-legged, on the bed, as far back against the wall as possible, so she could pretend the lump on the floor wasn't there. Suddenly, he was standing beside her.

Before she could so much as squeak a protest, he cupped her shoulders, dragged her against his body, and kissed her hard, fast, and deep, before dropping her back onto the bed.

He looked at her a moment, then he plucked her back up and did it again.

This time he drew her into his arms, one arm around her waist, the other hand palming the back of her head, and kissed her so deeply and passionately that she could have sworn she was throwing off steam, sizzling like an iron on the High Mist/Steam setting.

She clung to him, taking all he was giving. Sinking into his body, absorbing the steel and heat of the man.

When he released her this time, she plopped back down on the bed, kissed breathless.

She felt infinitely better than she had moments ago, as if some of his formidable strength had seeped into her through their kiss. God knew the man had strength

enough to spare.

He stared down at her, his whisky gaze narrowed with desire and something else, something she simply couldn't quite define; an emotion that eluded her. It almost seemed like regret, but that made no sense to her. What could he possibly be regretting?

When he lifted his hand and traced the backs of his knuckles up her cheek, slipping his fingers into the short dark curls at her temple, she dismissed the odd thought from her mind. He threaded his fingers through her hair slowly, as if savoring the silky texture of each curl.

It gave her a tiny chill, the lightness of his touch.

The man was a walking dichotomy. Those powerful neck-snapping, knife-throwing hands that did murder without pause were equally capable of tenderness and delicacy.

“Lock the door behind me when I leave, lass. I will be but a short time. Doona open it for anyone but me. Will you obey me?”

She opened her mouth to ask why, and what he was going to do, and just how he thought they were going to get out of the mess they were in, but he pressed the tip of his finger to her lips.

“Time is truly of the essence,” he said softly. “I never ken how long I’ll have. ’Tis action that will serve us best here, not words. Will you obey me for the now, Jessica?”

She blew out a pent breath and nodded.

“Good lass.”

She stuck her tongue out and mimed panting like a dog, grasping for any shred of levity she could find.

He gave her a faint, approving smile. “Keep your laughter, Jessica. ’Tis a saving grace.”

Her thoughts exactly.

He turned, scooped up the comforter with its bloody burden, and stalked from

the room, closing the door behind him.

“Lock it,” came the soft, low command from the other side.

Jessi slid the bolt and flipped the latch. Only then did his footfalls fade down the hall.

Forty minutes later, Jessi and Cian stepped in tandem from the elevator.

He was holding her hand, and although she’d never considered herself much of a hand-holder, she thoroughly liked the feel of her small hand in Cian’s big, strong one, and the snug interlacing of their fingers. She felt dainty, girly—actually, more like consummately womanly—beside this man.

She glanced up at him and inhaled a swift, shallow breath. He was devastatingly attractive. He was wearing faded jeans and a much-washed black *Ironman* T-shirt. His kilt was tossed over a shoulder, and his knife sheath was strapped blatantly around his thigh, the lethal blade now cleaned and returned to its protective casing. She’d tried telling him he couldn’t wear it that way, that he’d get them arrested. He’d replied that she could save her breath because Cian MacKeltar obeyed no laws but his own.

She’d not found that particularly surprising.

His muscular body rippled beneath the thin cotton fabric. With those crimson-and-black tattoos licking up his neck and encircling both powerful biceps, those wicked-looking wrist cuffs, his long braids, and his imposing height and brawn, he looked downright dangerous.

Considering that the clothing fit him, she wondered how he’d gotten it off of whomever he’d gotten it off of. It must have been one heck of a fight.

Then there was the matter of the clothing he’d brought *her* . . . smelling of another woman’s perfume. She had on hip-hugging *Lucky* jeans (with the cheeky words *Lucky You* stamped on the inside of her fly) that were X-treme Low Ride—as in, she sure wouldn’t be sitting down with her backside facing a roomful of people anytime soon—and a white, V-necked sweater so snug that it would have revealed every line of her bra.

If only he’d brought her one.

Oh, well. Beggars couldn't be choosers. All she needed to do was get to her car and she could toss a jacket over it.

When he'd returned to the room and thrust the bundle of clothing into her hands, she'd exclaimed, *Where did you get—*

Hush, he'd said instantly. *Dress and move. We must accomplish as much as possible as quickly as possible. When the glass reclaims me, we will have time to talk then.*

Okay. She'd shrugged. She knew she couldn't extricate herself from her current problems. Maybe he could. He'd already managed to accomplish two things she'd not thought she'd had a snowball's chance in hell of accomplishing: body disposal and clothing procuring. Though she really would have liked a bra. Enthusiastic was hardly an adjective she would have applied to herself at the moment, but parts of her were acting downright perky with every step. She hoped she wouldn't need to run for any reason.

The lobby was nearly deserted at this early hour. As they stepped into the long, gleaming foyer, her attention was drawn by a ripped, steroid-bulked man standing at the front desk with his arm around a sultry blonde who didn't look nearly as distraught as he. Coincidentally, he looked like exactly the kind of guy who might wear an *Ironman* T-shirt.

The man was shouting furiously at two desk clerks. Good, Jessi thought. She couldn't shake the paranoid feeling that any moment now a police officer was going to appear out of thin air and arrest them. Any distraction was a welcome one. Hopefully the clerks would be so busy dealing with the irate brute that they wouldn't notice her and Cian skulking out. Although, with a six-and-a-half-foot-tall mirror tucked beneath his arm, nothing the six-and-a-half-foot Cian MacKeltar did remotely resembled skulking.

Cian's hand tightened on hers. "Hurry, lass."

She picked up the pace, jouncing jauntily along.

"I'm telling you, the man is one of your guests. I watched him go back up on the elevator. The son of a bitch took our clothes!" the man shouted.

Jessi blinked. Eyed the man and his wife. Glanced down at herself.

Glanced up at Cian.

He shrugged. “Not all of them. I left them their undergarments.” When her brows rose, he added, “They were our size. We needed clothing. I suspected they had more, and look, they do. I ran into them in the elevator. Keep walking, lass. Move.”

They were halfway across the lobby when the man abruptly threw his hands up in exasperation and whirled around.

Oh no, here it comes, Jessi thought, stiffening. *We’re screwed. Now he’ll call the cops. We’re going to jail.*

“There he is!” the man roared furiously. “That’s the prick who made my wife take off her clothes!”

Jessi noticed the sultry blonde wasn’t looking too terribly upset by it, not nearly as upset as her husband seemed to be. She had a sudden vision of the pretty woman stripping down to her panties and bra in front of Cian and had the weirdest urge to go punch her. As if anything was the blond woman’s fault.

“You will be silent and cease looking at us. The four of you will turn and face the wall. Now,” Cian said coolly.

Jessi rolled her eyes. Obviously Cian MacKeltar had been some kind of aristocrat or member of the ruling class in his time. A feudal lord, maybe, perhaps even a relation to one of the ancient Pict kings, or Kenneth MacAlpin himself. He behaved like a tyrannical dictator, expecting the world to obey his slightest whims. *Cease looking at us*, indeed!

“Oh, please, you don’t really think they’re going to—” Jessi scoffed, only to break off in stunned disbelief.

Four people had just turned, as one, to face the wall behind the Check-In desk, without uttering so much as another peep. Not a curse, not a protest, not even an ill-concealed, disgruntled sigh.

She blinked at the bizarre sight. Then gaped up at Cian. Then back at the obedient little sheep.

“You will not attempt to follow us when we leave,” Cian added. *“You will remain silent and unmoving until well after we’re gone.”*

His words reminded her of the way he'd dispatched Mark in the hallway, how he'd ordered the valets about and dominated the desk clerk when they'd checked in.

How was he doing it? What *was* Cian MacKeltar?

"Come, lass," he said.

She stood rooted to the ground for a moment, assessing herself suspiciously, trying to decide whether she was feeling, in the least little way, compelled in some strange way to obey him.

Nope.

She inched away from him, just to be sure. Tipped up her nose defiantly. Made a face at him.

Ducky. She felt just like her usual self, chock-full of free will.

But apparently *they* weren't, she thought, looking at people at the desk again.

"What did you do to them?" she demanded.

" 'Twould require a lengthy explana—"

"I know, I know," she interrupted peevishly, "and we don't have time, right? Fine. Just tell me this: Could you make them erase all record of my having been here from their computers?"

He looked perplexed a moment, then slow understanding dawned in his whisky eyes. "Ah, you mean so you cannot be linked to the blood-stained room! Aye, I can do that. You must direct me, though. There is much about your century that eludes me."

They hastened to the desk, where Jessi told him what to do.

He issued a series of terse commands to the clerks, and Jessi watched in abject fascination as they complied without hesitation, pulling up their files for Room 2112. They rescinded all credit transactions, deleted all records, and wiped her clean from the hotel's memory banks. Whatever he was doing and however he was doing it, the man packed a serious punch in the charismatic persuasion department.

There was one great big problem solved. Gone were her visions of oversized beetles and roaches, and calling her mother from some Third-World country.

As they were finishing up, Jessi stepped away from Cian and circled around him to stare at the bodybuilder and his wife. They were motionless, silent, staring at the wall. Their eyes had the same glazed, eerily vacant expression as the clerk's. Somehow she'd overlooked that before, too, probably because she'd always been too busy looking at the sexy Highlander to really notice much about the people around him.

"What did you do to them? How?"

Tucking the mirror back beneath his arm, he took her hand. "Not now, lass. We must make haste."

" 'Not now,' " she grumbled. "How come whenever I have questions, it's always 'not now'? Will it *ever* be now?"

“Can you not make greater haste?” Cian glanced at Jessica over the top of the mirror that was once again propped on its side between the auto’s bucket seats.

He hated not knowing how long he had. It imbued everything with a heightened sense of urgency.

“Only if you can somehow order rush-hour traffic in Chicago on a rainy Friday morning to go somewhere else,” she said with a roll of her eyes, waving a hand at the wall-to-wall cars packing the streets. Then she frowned at him over the mirror. “You can’t, right?”

“Nay. Lass, you must go as fast as ’tis possible. Seize any opportunity to escape this pandemonium.”

Returning to full immersion in his thoughts, he barely heard her sardonic “Aye, aye, sir.”

The second attack had come long before he’d expected it. Truth be told, he’d not expected it at all. Not once they’d checked into her immense “hotel.”

It had made him realize that he was at a tremendous disadvantage in her century, one for which he couldn’t compensate. For, though he’d devoured tomes and papers and incessantly studied the world beyond Lucan’s window—preparing, always preparing for any opportunity to take his chance at vengeance—though he knew of such things as computers and cars and airplanes and televisions, he knew also the world’s current population. And the ninth-century Highlander in him had believed—as far as they’d traveled from her university into the heart of a city of such proportions—that they’d be as difficult to locate as a dust mote in a haystack the size of all of Scotland.

He’d been wrong. Dead wrong.

He simply couldn't fathom the bird's-eye view of her world. He might be familiar with the statistics, he might be cognizant of modern inventions, but he couldn't *feel* the way things were put together. All the book learning in the world wouldn't keep a man alive in battle. A warrior had to know and understand his terrain.

And he didn't.

He needed to get her somewhere he did. Lucan would not take this woman. He would not let the bastard harm so much as a hair on her lovely head. "I doona ken how he found us," he muttered darkly.

There was a gusty sigh beside him. "I do. I'm a dick," Jessi informed him glumly.

He glanced over at her, lips twitching. Modern idioms were confounding, but at least he recognized them for what they were. "Nay, lass, I doona see that. Naught about you resembles any portion of my anatomy," he said playfully, seeking to lighten her mood and prevent her from dwelling on the horrifying scene that had played out so recently in front of her.

He'd never been so frustrated in his life as he'd felt, trapped inside the glass, having to push her, goad her by threatening to let her go to jail to get her to stop screaming, when all he'd really wanted to do was pull her into his arms and gentle her with his body. Take her cries with his kisses, comfort her. Remove the damned offending corpse from her environ.

Instead, he'd told her stories from his childhood to try to take her mind away and help her pass the time. Speaking soft and low, he's woven what Highland magic for her he could. He'd left out the grimmer memories, those of a lad at a tender ten years of age who'd been responsible for choosing battles and sides and sending men who'd been his father's closest companions, men who'd been as fathers to *him*, off to die.

A lad made laird in the Highlands at birth grew up fast. Or lost his clan. Or died. He accepted neither loss nor death easily.

He'd told her instead of summer days of sunshine and heather, of the icy pleasure of a cool loch on a hot day, of tales of his seven bonny sisters and their endless quests for husbands of whom he would approve.

At last, the panicked expression had receded from her eyes. She was no willy-nilly peahen. In fact, by the hour, his estimation of her continued to rise.

She was a fascinating woman.

And not for you, the tatters of his humanity warned.

Nay, not for him, he agreed with those tatters, glad they were tatters and not capable of mounting a compelling argument.

For he *would* have her. Despite the feeble protests of his honor, he was going to seduce her the moment he got her somewhere safe. He'd known since the night she'd licked him that he was going to make her his woman. Consequences be damned.

Why not? He already was.

Before disposing of the assassin's body, he'd searched the dead woman thoroughly. She'd carried nothing but weapons. He'd relieved her of a knife and two guns, which were now concealed in his boots.

The woman had not meant to kill his Jessica.

Had she, she would have used one of the guns. He knew a great deal about modern weapons; they fascinated him. He'd long itched to get his hands on a gun and test its capabilities. There was a ninth-century warrior in him that would never lose his love of a good battle and fine armament.

No, the assassin had intended to subdue his woman, not kill her. 'Twas the why of the needle, not the blade or the bullet.

The realization had given birth to a whole new wellspring of hatred for his long-time gaoler. Somehow Lucan had learned of Jessica St. James and wanted her alive. From time to time, Lucan had entertained himself with a woman before the Dark Glass, uncaring if she saw or heard Cian, because the woman didn't survive to tell of it anyway. Lucan liked to break things. He always had. The harder it was to break, the more he enjoyed it.

But those were dark thoughts. Thoughts from a time that would never be again, for he would never again be owned by Lucan Trevayne. Never again be forced to hang on that bastard's wall and watch an innocent woman sexually brutalized and murdered.

No matter the price of vengeance. Of freedom.

He'd come to terms with that price long ago.

"Don't you want to know what I did?" she was saying.

"Aye, I do." His gaze fixed on her profile. She nibbled her lower lip a moment and it made him abruptly rock-hard at the mere thought of her luscious mouth nibbling on *him*.

"I used a credit card." She sounded disgusted with herself. "I know in books and movies the bad guys always track you by credit or ATM transactions, but I thought that was just an exaggeration cultivated by the media to facilitate plot momentum. That if it could really be done, it would take time—like days or a week." She frowned up at him. "I mean, come on, how powerful is this Lucan-guy that he can find out where I've used my credit card within hours of my using it?"

He firmly corralled his lustful thoughts. He needed to understand such matters. They were imperative to his ability to keep her alive and safe from harm. "Explain to me about 'credit cards,' lass." He'd once seen an advertisement on television for such a thing, where club-wielding, painted warriors had poured down in a bloodthirsty horde on someone who'd chosen the wrong card, but he couldn't begin to see how using such a thing had betrayed them.

When she'd clarified its purpose, and explained the records generated by the use of it, he snorted. Now he understood how Lucan had found them so quickly. Bloody hell—was there no such thing as privacy left in her world? Everything was connected to everything else by those computers of hers. All a man did and said was a matter of public or semipublic record, which was appalling to a mountain man who liked to keep his matters his own. "He's that powerful, lass. You may not use such things again. Have you no other form of coin?"

"Not enough to get us out of the country, which is what I'm beginning to think we need to do," she said gloomily.

Aye, she had the right of that.

The fact that he'd not even *known* she'd done something that could be traced—revealing them as clearly as an X on a map—because he'd not understood what a credit card was, meant he couldn't possibly hope to contain their exposure.

Not here, anyway.

Her twenty-first-century world had too many variables beyond his comprehension for him to control.

Which meant he had to take her back in time.

Och, nay, not literally—not through the *Ban Drochaid*, the stones of the White Bridge that the Keltar guarded; even *he* gave credence to the legend of the Draghar, having no wish to be possessed by the thirteen evil ancients—but figuratively.

That he could do.

If he could get her deep enough into the Highlands, then he could live with her for the next nineteen days by ninth-century means. Means untraceable by modern methods. He could shelter her in caves, warm her with his body, hunt for food, and feed her with his hands. In the Old Ways, time-honored ways in which a man had once seen to the needs of his woman.

All they had to do was somehow get across an ocean. Quickly and without leaving a trace.

Would Lucan look for him there?

Certainly, once he realized he was no longer in Chicago. Lucan knew him, nigh as well as he knew Lucan.

But there, in the wilderness, Cian would have more of an advantage. Even in the ninth century, Lucan had never been an outdoorsman, eschewing physical exertion in lieu of creature comforts. Och, aye, Cian would have the edge in his hills.

“Tell me everything you know about modern travel,” he commanded. “Tell me about your airplanes, where they go, how often they go, where one may procure one, and how. Tell me in the greatest detail you can. Give me a bird’s-eye view, lass. I need ken it all, even the most minuscule facts you might deem unimportant. I’m a ninth-century man, lass. Teach me as one.”

Near noon, Jessi demanded they stop for food. She was starving. He might not need to eat, being immortal or whatever he was, but she sure did. The first time she'd ordered room service it hadn't come. The second time, the dishes had gotten splattered by blood. Aside from a PowerBar and a bag of peanuts she'd found in her backpack, she'd had nothing else to eat in the past thirty-six hours.

Since leaving Chicago, Cian had grilled her intensively about everything from transportation to computers to accommodations to monetary transactions.

After listening for a short time, he'd told her that they dare not leave the country from O'Hare or Midway; that if Lucan had men watching for them anywhere, it would be at the two local airports.

Jessi still couldn't quite believe that they were actually going to try to leave the country, and had no idea how he thought they were going to pull it off.

He'd told her to drive them to the next nearest airport. She didn't know if Indianapolis really was the next nearest, but it was the only other airport she'd been able to figure out how to get to from a map.

They stopped to eat just east of Lafayette, Indiana, about forty-five minutes up I-65 from the airport.

The smell of deep-fried chicken and fries made her mouth water the moment they stepped inside Chick-fil-A. She always felt like she was doing cows a favor when she ate there; she loved those silly billboards along the highways with their EAT MOR CHIKIN cow campaign. From NEW DIET CRAZE: LOW-COW to EAT CHIKIN CUDDLE COWZ, the ads sporting black-and-white spotted cows clutching poorly penned placards promoting chicken consumption made her laugh out loud every time she drove past one.

I will procure food and we'll dine in the car, he'd insisted. We must continue moving.

She could just imagine how he planned to "procure" food. He'd probably leave the entire restaurant standing frozen until "well after we are away from here."

If I eat while driving, she'd disagreed, I'll wreck. If I wreck, the mirror will probably break. Her legs were stiff, she had to pee, and she was getting grumpy. What would happen to you then?

He'd looked stricken. *We'll dine within.*

She'd ordered six baskets of chicken fingers and wedges of crinkly fries, and now, perched at a brightly colored yellow-and-white table, was contently making headway into her second basket. He was halfway through his third.

"These resemble no chicken fingers I've ever seen, lass. And I saw a fair amount of chickens in my day. There was this wench in the stables with the most remarkable . . . well, never mind that. You must grow fowl considerably larger now. I shudder to ponder the size of their beaks."

"They're not really chicken *fingers*," she hastened to explain, not caring for the imagery at all, as she dipped one into a tub of spicy barbecue sauce and snapped off a bite. She was going to stop there, she really was, but her treacherous lips had other ideas. " 'Most remarkable' what?"

" 'Tis of no import, lass." He devoured another chicken finger in two bites.

"Then why did you bring it up?" she said stiffly.

"I put it to rest, too, lass." There went two more fingers.

"No, you didn't. You left it hanging. Now it's hanging out there. I hate things hanging out there. Fix it. 'Remarkable' what?"

He dipped a potato wedge into ketchup and made short work of it. "Chickens, lass, she had remarkable chickens. What did you think I meant?"

Jessi's nostrils flared. She glared at him a moment, then looked away. Why did she even care? So, maybe the ninth-century bimbo had had remarkable eyes or legs or something. No way her breasts were better. At that thought, she shrugged her jean-jacket off her shoulders and sat up straighter. And so what, anyway? The bimbo had been dead for eleven centuries. The only thing remarkable about her now was that anyone even remembered her at all.

"Back to the chickens, lass, if they're not fingers, why are they named thusly?"

"It's just a catchphrase," she said irritably, snapping off another bite. "Something some marketing guy came up with to make them more appealing."

"Your century finds the notion of eating fingers of chickens appealing? What of their toes?"

She took a sip of Coke. The chicken was suddenly dry as sawdust on her tongue. “I don’t think anybody who orders them thinks, for even a minute, about fingers, or toes, any more than they think about little pink chicken nipples when they’re eating chicken breasts—”

She broke off, eyes narrowing. His head was canted down, his hair shielding his face, but she could plainly see his shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

The Neanderthal was yanking her chain.

And she’d fallen for every bit of it.

After a moment, she shook her head and snorted. He’d been poking fun not only at her century but himself, in a dry, subtle way. And she’d bought right into the stereotype he’d been feeding her: me-big-and-stupid-archaic-he-man. Her snort became a snicker, her snicker a laugh.

He glanced up sharply, his dark amber gaze fixing on her face. “I hoped to make you laugh,” he said softly. “I’ve not seen much in the way of happiness in your eyes since we’ve crossed paths.”

“No, I don’t suppose you have,” she agreed. “It’s been a bit grim.” They shared a companionable silence for a moment, across the table in Chick-fil-A.

“So was it really her chickens that were remarkable?”

Cian shook his head. “Nay, lass.”

She scowled. “What, then? Come on, you’re the one who brought her up.”

He flashed her a devilish grin. “There was no wench in the stables, Jessica. I but wondered if you’d care.”

Two could push for information, she thought mulishly a short time later as they hastened over soggy, slippery autumn leaves on their brisk walk across the parking lot toward her car. The October breeze ruffling her short dark hair held the promise of the long, cold midwestern winter to come. The chilly drizzle that had been falling steadily since they’d left Chicago had eased to a mist, but the sky was still leaden with thunderheads, threatening worse rain ahead. She fluffed her short curls back from her face and tugged her jean-jacket closer. In contrast

to the cool clime, her temper was hot; she was steamed and humiliated that he'd gotten a rise out of her. She hardly knew the man, and she'd felt a vicious stab of jealousy over him. Twice. In a matter of hours. That wasn't like her at all. And the fact that she hardly knew the man was really beginning to bother her. She'd accepted that she was going to have to entrust herself to him to survive, but, by God, she wanted to know more about the man that she was entrusting herself to.

Who and what was Cian MacKeltar? And who and what was this Lucan Trevayne person who wanted her dead just because she'd seen his blasted artifact? They were both clearly more than mere men.

As they approached the car, Jessi stopped at the driver's-side door and scowled across the roof at him.

He arched an inquiring brow.

"I'm not going any farther until you answer a few of my questions."

"Jessica—"

"Don't 'Jessica' me," she said peevishly. "Five minutes is all I'm asking for. Surely five minutes won't get us killed. What are you, Cian?"

He assessed her a long moment, then shrugged one powerful shoulder. "I'm a Druid, lass."

" 'A Druid'?" She blinked. "You mean, as in one of those white-robe-wearing, mistletoe-loving guys that thought they could communicate with the otherworld by performing human sacrifices?" In her area of specialization, she was constantly encountering references to the mysterious, much-maligned priesthood. The famous Lindow Man, a late-Iron Age body found preserved in a Cheshire bog by peat cutters in 1984, evidenced signs of ritual murder and, with mistletoe pollen in his stomach, there'd been much speculation about his possible link with Druids.

He winced. "Ouch, is that how the world thinks of us now?"

"Pretty much. Are you telling me Druids were actually magicians of some kind? Like Merlin or something?"

He glanced guardedly around the parking lot. "Jessica, there's magic all around you. People doona ken it because those who possess it take every precaution to

conceal it. Magic has always been, and will always be.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So this Lucan guy is also a Druid?”

“He was once a Druid. He became a dark sorcerer.”

A week ago, she would have laughed herself silly at anyone who’d claimed such things existed. She would have asked them about lions and tigers and bears and ruby slippers with built-in teleportation devices. Now, resting her elbows on the wet roof of her car, propping her chin on her hands, she only sighed and said, “Okay, so what’s the difference?”

“A Druid is born with magic in his blood. A dark sorcerer’s magic is acquired via rigorous study and apprenticeship to black magicks, enhanced by rituals and spells. A Druid respects the innate nature of things and permits the universe its pattern. A dark sorcerer perverts the nature of things to his own aims, changing the universe’s pattern without thought to ramifications. A Druid seeks knowledge to heal and nurture. A sorcerer seeks dangerous alchemy to transform and control. A Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer is far more powerful than either a mere sorcerer or a mere Druid.”

“Well, if he’s a Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer and you’re just a Druid, and a Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer is so much more powerful, then just how do you plan to defeat—oh! Crimeny! Shit!”

Understanding belatedly dawning, she backpedaled away from him, butting up against the rain-slicked side of the car parked parallel to hers. “I can be so dense sometimes,” she breathed. “Because *you’re* one of the bad guys, too, aren’t you? *You* turned dark sorcerer, too, didn’t you? It’s the only way it makes sense.”

His whisky eyes narrowed. “Get in the car, Jessica,” he said softly.

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. No way. I’m not done yet. You still haven’t told me about that commanding thing you do. When you tell people to do things, and they just do it—what is that, anyway?”

A muscle in his jaw worked and he regarded her a long, silent moment. Then, “’Tis the Druid art of Voice. Some call it the Voice of Power.” He saw no need to tell her that others called it the Voice of Death, if the Druid was powerful enough. And he was. Though he’d not known he could kill with his tongue until it had been too late and he’d already killed with his tongue. “ ’Tis a spell of

compulsion, lass. Now get in the car. The storm worsens.”

As if to support his words, the rain chose that moment to turn into a steady, soaking drizzle and a boom of thunder crashed overhead.

But Jessi wasn’t going to let an inconvenient storm interrupt her now. She had a small storm of her own brewing. This compelling thing bothered her. A lot. “Can you make people do things they don’t want to do? Like bad things that would seriously go against their will? Are they even aware of it when you’re doing it to them? Do they remember when it’s over?” she demanded.

The muscle leapt in his jaw again. “Get in the car, Jessica. I’m trying to keep you alive,” he said coolly.

“What if I refuse?” she said just as coolly. “Will you *force* me into the car? *Compel* me into it? Now that I think about it, I’m surprised you haven’t already tried to use this Voice of yours on me. Why bother being nice to anyone when you could just command anything you want? Geez, you wouldn’t even have to seduce a woman, you could just order her to—” She broke off abruptly, eyes widening.

“Get. In. The. Car. Jessica.”

“Oh, God, you *did* try it on me,” she exclaimed. “You tried it the second I set you free. You tried to make me kiss you and show you my breasts. Didn’t you?”

His dark, chiseled face was a fortress. If he felt any emotion at all, it was completely concealed. Gaze remote, he inclined his head, a single time.

Behind him, lightning flashed, brilliant and jagged, against the grim, steely Indiana sky.

A short, caustic laugh escaped her. “And it didn’t work, did it? For some reason, it doesn’t work on me at all, does it?”

He gave a single shake of his head. “None of my magyck does.”

Jessi stared at him, struggling to take in this new information that put such a different slant on the way she’d so naively believed things to be. She’d been walking around thinking that the good guy was keeping her safe from the bad guy.

Only to find out that there were no good guys in Jessi St. James's world.

Just bad and badder.

She wanted to know exactly how bad. "So how far would you have taken it, Mister Poor-me-I'm-trapped-in-a-mirror-dark-sorcerer? If it had worked, if I'd 'removed my woolen and shown you my breasts,' how far would you have pushed?"

"How the bloody hell far do you think?"

"I'm asking *you*. How far?" she demanded.

"I haven't fucked in eleven hundred and thirty-three years, Jessica," he said flatly. "I am a man."

"How far?" she repeated frostily.

"All the way, woman. All the frigging way. *Now get in the damned car.*" A flash of lightning, followed by a booming thunderclap, punctuated his final words, as if Nature herself conspired with him.

Jessi stared at him in silence, rain dripping down her face, splattering on her chest, pondering her options. Being brutally honest with herself.

She could walk away now. Try it on her own. See if she could manage to disappear for the next nineteen days.

She was being hunted by a bona fide, ninth-century sorcerer who wanted her dead.

She was being kept alive by another bona fide ninth-century sorcerer who wanted to have sex with her and was willing to use magic to score.

Her life or her "virtue."

It bore considering that it was a virtue she'd very nearly given him of her own accord.

Granted, she'd hardly been in her right mind at the time, but still.

She got in the damned car.

They were flying at a cruising altitude of 36,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean when the Dark Glass reclaimed him.

At least they hadn't been about to have sex this time, so Jessi wasn't left with a bad case of hostile hormones, and aghast at herself for yet another appalling lapse in moral fiber.

She glanced hastily around when he vanished, and caught several other passengers doing double takes. It didn't surprise her to discover other people were looking straight at him when he disappeared. He was just that kind of man, the kind people watched. Some because they wondered what it would be like to have sex with such a gorgeous, dangerous-looking hunk of testosterone (the category she was in), others because they were concerned about their purses, wallets, or lives (the category she was in).

None of the onlookers said a word. Assuming any of them believed it had genuinely happened, not one of them appeared in any hurry to talk about it.

She smothered a dry laugh. *Been there, done that, thought I was going nuts, too, the first few times I saw him.*

Tugging the worn blue airline blanket up to her chin, she pretended nothing was amiss, that she'd boarded alone, and been alone all this time. She'd been braced for him to disappear. He'd told her before they'd embarked that the Dark Glass would no doubt reclaim him long before they got to Scotland.

Scotland. Crimeny. She was on her way out of the country! Life as she'd known it—work, school, and all her tidily scheduled plans—were slipping away from her at the astonishing rate of 565 miles per hour.

She'd not believed they were going to be able to pull it off until they'd arrived at the Indianapolis airport and he'd proceeded to give her a mind-boggling display of his formidable "talents."

He'd used his "Voice" to coerce airport employees to crate and ship the mirror to Edinburgh. Unwilling to generate any records of their passage, he'd bypassed procuring tickets, and instead "persuaded" their way through security, past armed officers. There'd not been a direct flight available to Scotland, and he'd refused to go through London, as it would take them too close to Lucan for his comfort, so he'd "Voiced" them onto a Boeing 747 bound first for Paris, showing only his palm as necessary documentation, accompanied by terse commands.

She'd watched in abject amazement. Quite simply *anything* the man said, people believed and obeyed. Mutely, docilely, blankly. He'd used a few "forgetting" commands as well, though he'd told her they were tricky things and he was employing mild ones only to buy them all the time possible. He'd told her that a true forgetting spell took much time and was risky, as the mind endeavored to retain the imprints it bore, and stripping away one memory frequently damaged many others. It was a damage he was clearly reluctant to be the cause of, which she found interesting for a Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer.

By the time they'd boarded, and dropped into emergency-exit seats (two cooing female flight attendants had much-too-sweetly for her taste volunteered to rearrange things so the six-and-a-half-foot sexy Scotsman could "stretch out his legs a bit," *Grrrr . . .*), Jessi'd had a pretty darn good idea why his "talents" didn't work on her.

She'd actually felt it *trying* to work on her.

Each time he'd laid the compulsion on thick, her head had itched inside, just above the metal plate splicing her skull together, the same way it had when she'd first freed him and he'd been attempting to compel her.

It felt as if his commands were buzzing up against her metal plate, making it vibrate beneath her skin. She couldn't begin to comprehend the mechanics of it, she just knew it somehow shielded her from his magic.

Thank heavens! For the first time in her life, she was grateful she'd taken that horrendous, skull-splitting fall.

All the way, woman, he'd said back in the rainy parking lot of Chick-fil-A. Meaning he would have used Voice on her to have sex with her.

It had perturbed her. Deeply.

Until she'd realized he was lying.

Maybe he believed he would have pushed her all the way, but she didn't.

She judged people by their actions, not their words. And his actions just didn't support his words. Big bark—little bite. Even his commands to get them on board the plane had been tempered. He'd wielded the least coercion necessary to accomplish their goals.

Bottom line was: Any man who would have used magic to have sex with her against her will would simply have changed tactics when magic had failed, and raped her with his brutally superior strength.

Especially after eleven centuries of enforced celibacy.

Cian was nearly six feet six inches of pure muscle. He'd had multiple opportunities to do anything he wanted to her.

And he'd not harmed her in any way.

Tucking her legs up, she snuggled deeper into the blanket. The lights were low, it had been yet another long day, and the steady hum of the engines was lulling her to sleep.

She closed her eyes, pondering the power he had—the Druid art of Voice, he'd called it—trying to imagine what it would be like to have the ability to make anyone do anything you wanted them to do, merely by telling them to do it.

She was blown away by the possibilities.

And by the awesome responsibility.

Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer? She wasn't so sure she believed that. Oh, maybe a little bad, but the man wasn't evil. In fact, he seemed a near paragon of restraint, in light of all he was probably capable of doing.

She yawned, wondering how young he'd been when he'd realized such a thing was within his means. "Voice" meant consummate power, consummate freedom. It meant being able to live with absolute impunity.

No excuses, no apologies necessary.

If it were her gift, she thought drowsily, she could hop on a plane anytime she wanted, fly to England, and make them let her pet Stonehenge. Or she could go to Ireland and visit the museums and touch things. Take things home with her, for heaven's sake!

Or, she mused dreamily, she could go to a bank, make them give her millions of dollars, buy herself houses in ten different countries, and spend her life playing on pristine white beaches in the sun. Or, the heck with money, she could just go to those countries and make people *give* their houses to her. She wondered how many people Voice could control at any one time, and for how long. Surely there were limits.

Still, "What a ridiculous amount of power," she murmured on a sleepy sigh. The world would, quite literally, be one's playground.

Still, even with it, he'd somehow gotten trapped in a mirror for centuries on end.

Strong warrior's body, yet gentle hands. Formidably endowed with magic, yet trapped.

What an enigma he was!

It occurred to her, as she drifted off to sleep, that it should probably worry her a lot that—even in the middle of the utter chaos her life had become—he was an enigma she was greatly looking forward to deciphering.

An áit a bhfuil do chroi is ann a thabharfas do chosa thú.
(Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.)

—OLD SCOTS SAYING

PART 2

SCOTLAND

14

THE GOD-AWFUL HOUR OF 3:00 A.M.
EDINBURGH AIRPORT
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 15

“No, I *don’t* have a claim ticket,” Jessi told the woman behind the desk, for the fifth time, beyond exasperated. “I keep telling you that. But I can describe it. Exactly. Every tiny little detail. Both crate and contents. Now how could I possibly know that such a crate even existed, not to mention what was inside it, unless it was mine?”

“And I keep telling *you*,” the woman huffed, “that nothing gets claimed without a claim ticket, young lady.”

“You don’t understand, I need that crate,” Jessi said urgently.

“I understand perfectly,” the fifty-something, ash-blondé replied, without a flicker of emotion on her Botox-smoothed face, but with an unmistakable sneer in her voice. “You want to collect something for which you have no claim ticket. How would you feel if I permitted someone else to claim *your* package with no claim ticket? How could we hope to control our packages at *all* if we permitted such unauthorized claimings to occur? That’s why, young lady, we give claim

tickets in the first place. One ticket retrieves one corresponding package. You may file a missing claim ticket claim, if you wish.”

“How long will it take me to get my package if I file a missing claim ticket claim?”

“Processing a missing claim ticket claim can take several weeks to several months.”

Jessi was not pessimistic by nature, but she could have sworn a note of smug satisfaction had just entered the woman’s voice, and she suddenly had no doubt any claim *she* filed would lean toward the several months mark. For whatever reason, the woman didn’t like her and didn’t want to help her.

And without the mirror, Jessi was doomed. She had a whopping forty-two dollars and seventeen cents in her purse. Oh, sure, she had a credit card, but the moment she used it Lucan would know exactly where she was. She needed the bottomless bank account of Cian MacKeltar’s deep, sexy, magical voice.

One way or another, she had to get the mirror back. And it was pretty clear that this woman had no intention of facilitating things. Some people were problem-solvers and some people were problem-compounders. This woman was a Compounder with a capital C.

Jessi muttered a nearly inaudible thank you and turned hurriedly away before she said something she’d regret.

Sighing, she shifted her backpack to her *other* sore shoulder, trudged back down the long hallway, out into the main part of the airport, and slumped wearily into a hard plastic chair.

She glanced at her watch, slipped it from her wrist, and moved the hour hand forward six hours. It was a little after nine in the morning, Edinburgh time.

Well, she consoled herself, *the bright side of things is that he’ll definitely be able to come out now, if I can just get to him*. It had been over twenty-four hours in both time zones since she’d he’d last been free and, drat it all, she actually *missed* the domineering barbarian. Missed his annoying testosterone overload, missed knowing that any minute now he might give her one of those kisses that vacuumed her brain out through her ear and turned her into a vapid little sex-kitten.

Leaning back in the torture-chamber of a chair, she rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Flight 412 leaving Edinburgh for London will depart . . .” a woman’s lilting voice spoke brightly from the speaker above her.

Leaving Edinburgh. She was in Scotland! The fabulous, five-thousand-year-old stone furniture of Skara Brae was near. The incredible Rosslyn Chapel was a mere eight miles from Edinburgh. The ruins of Dunnottar and countless other ancient treasures loomed just beyond the airport doors.

And she was beginning to think she might never make it that far. Her connecting flight from Paris had landed five hours ago.

And she’d been trying to get her hands on the mirror ever since.

It had taken her nearly an hour just to find the idiotic Special Items Claim Pickup Office.

It hadn’t been anywhere near baggage, as she’d expected, but down a long hallway, tucked back in the rear of the airport, accessible only through a window that opened onto a long counter built into the wall. It had been so deserted that she’d not believed she was in the right place until she’d glimpsed the tiny handwritten sign perched on the corner of the desk. It seemed almost as if they *wanted* to keep the unclaimed items. Maybe, she thought cynically, they auctioned them off to employees or something when their time was up.

There wasn’t even an exterior door into the office; apparently staff gained access some other way.

If there’s no name on the crate, where will it go when it arrives in Edinburgh? Cian had asked, prior to compelling the airline employees to crate and ship it.

It would have to go to unclaimed baggage. She couldn’t imagine it going anywhere else. Without a name or a return shipping address, they certainly couldn’t send it back. She’d learned that lesson herself, trying to get rid of the crate. She also knew that airports were required to hold items, even unmarked ones, for a certain number of days. She’d lost her luggage once, between home in Maine and school in Chicago, and by the time it had resurfaced, there’d not been a single identifying tag on it.

If you go to this “unclaimed baggage” place and can identify it, will they give it to you? Cian had pressed.

I don’t know, she’d replied.

We’ll have to take the chance. I’ll not leave any records of our travel. If you can but get into the same room with my crate, and say the spell, I can break free and use Voice to get us out of there. Jessica, lass, I’m sorry ’tis not a foolproof plan. You’ll have to improvise.

Improvisation hadn’t seemed such a daunting task back in Indianapolis. But then she’d been feeling weirdly invincible walking along beside him, and they’d both mistakenly thought the crate would be somewhere that she could *see* it, if not actually collect it.

She groaned, wishing she had a single ounce of Cian’s incredible powers of Voice to use on Ms. Erase-My-Face at the Special Items Claim Desk.

Then again, she mused, she wasn’t entirely certain she would want that kind of power, if given the opportunity. It would certainly be a test of just how good a person really was deep down.

Shaking her head, she pushed to her feet. She would kill a bit of time grabbing a cup off coffee and a croissant, then she would trudge back down the long silent corridor and try again.

Maybe by then the woman would be on break and somebody else would be working.

The woman was not only *not* on break by the time Jessi got back to the Special Items pickup window; she got an expression when she saw Jessi walking toward the desk again.

It was hard to pick up on it, unnoticeable as it was from more than a few feet away, but if Jessi peered really hard, she could see the faintest pucker of a muscle trying to contract between the woman’s brows.

Not good.

“Could you just bring it out here and let me see it?” Jessi asked the woman. “Just

let me make sure it's okay and it's really here, then I swear I'll go away and leave you alone. I'll fill out your forms and go through the red tape. Just let me make sure it actually got here. I'm worried about it. Please? Could I please just see it?"

"There are *no* exceptions," the woman said with a sniff.

"But I—"

"Which word didn't you understand? It must have been the 'no.' You are *so* typical. People like you *always* think they should be exceptions."

Jessi blinked. "People like me?" she echoed, stymied as to just what kind of "people" this woman thought she was.

"Yes. People like *you*." The woman's gaze dropped to her breasts. "I'm sure you've gotten used to manipulating men to get them to do whatever you want, but you can't manipulate me. And no men work this desk, young lady, so don't even *think* about trying to come back at another time. I've already warned my coworkers about you. No one is going to fall for your shenanigans. You're going to have to follow the rules for a change, little missy, just like everyone else."

Jessi blinked, rendered speechless by the unfair attack. She'd never used her looks to get anywhere in life, and if they'd ever helped her, she'd certainly not been aware of it.

Without another word, Stone-face inclined her pinched nose, moved away from the window, and made a big show of dismissing her. After a moment, she began typing busily away at a computer terminal with lethal-looking orange nails.

Jessi swallowed a little growl. *Focus*, she told herself, *and not on Stone-face's unwarranted nastiness. She is not your problem. Getting the mirror back is.*

Backing up a few steps, she scanned the counter.

The mirror *had* to be nearby. It just had to. If one came to this window to claim special items, logic dictated the items would be stored close at hand for the purpose of expediency. One would present their ticket and the item would be brought to the counter. Which seemed to imply that the items had to be somewhere behind the counter.

She pushed up on tiptoes and glanced over the desk. Stone-face was still making

a big show of ignoring her, which was just fine with Jessi. There were no crates stacked back there that she could see, and the little room, which was about twenty feet wide and maybe ten feet deep, didn't look as if it was large enough for more than three or four employees to stand lined up at the desk.

On the left wall hung a gaudily framed, turbulent seascape, adjacent to a phone marked SECURITY. The rear wall was dotted by small paintings of ships at sea, interspersed with various official-looking certificates in utilitarian black frames.

Aha—there! On the right wall, a half-opened door revealed a long, brightly lit corridor stretching off into the distance.

“My crate is down that hallway, isn't it?” Jessi exclaimed. She didn't expect an answer from the woman. She knew she'd have to get it from her face.

The woman glanced up, the hint of a muscle contracting between her brows.

Yes—Cian was close! *Improvvisably* close.

I can do this, I can do this, I know I can, she told herself. She stared down at the floor for a few seconds, steeling her nerve. Then she turned and began walking away from the counter.

Behind her, the woman muttered snidely, “About time. And good riddance to you, you spoiled little—”

The rest of it was muttered too low for Jessi to hear, but she didn't need to, she'd already picked up on the general gist of it. *Oh, you are going to be sooo surprised*, she thought just as snidely. She didn't mind people getting upset with her when she'd done something to deserve it, but she'd not done a thing to earn this woman's animosity, other than being young and curvy. And she couldn't help being either of those things. It wasn't as if either of those things had ever gotten her anywhere in her life. Hard work had. Boobs certainly hadn't. In fact, were she pushed to divvy up percentages, she'd attribute 90 percent to aggravation and 10 percent to pleasure.

Wiggling her shoulders to make sure her backpack was snug enough, she glanced behind her, assessed the distance to and height of the counter, and took a deep, fortifying breath.

Then she whirled around, took a running leap, and catapulted herself into the air.

She managed to pump up more speed with her short dash than she actually needed, and upon clearing the exterior wall of the counter, she couldn't check her forward momentum. Skidding pell-mell over the veneered surface on her hands and knees, she crashed to the floor, taking down two mainframes and a stack of manuals with her. She hit the floor so hard it made her teeth *clack* together.

"Oh!" the woman shrieked. "Out! Out! *Out!* You are not allowed back here! Only airport employees are permitted behind the desk!"

Jessi didn't waste breath replying. Scrambling to her feet, she clambered over monitors and manuals, and pushed through the half-opened door. Her heart was pounding and adrenaline was rushing through her veins, making her feel shaky, yet intensely, aggressively focused. It was no wonder some people got addicted to adrenaline rushes.

"I'm calling security!" the woman screeched after her, snatching the phone from the wall.

"You just do that . . ." Jessi dropped her voice, but despite her best efforts, "bitch" didn't come out quite as *sotto voce* as she'd intended. Oops. Darn it, now she was going to have to outrun security too!

But the woman's nastiness worked to her advantage this time. Apparently, Stone-face had been secretly itching to take matters into her own hands and Jessi's expletive was just enough to push her over the edge.

Slapping the phone back on the wall, Stone-face shot through the door after her. "I don't need security, I can deal with you myself, you brazen little hussy!" Sharp orange talons closed on the fabric of Jessi's backpack, yanking her to a halt. "You are *not* going back there!"

Jessi dug in her heels, scanning the corridor. It was roughly a hundred yards long, with a maze of hallways branching off it, and doors dotting both the left and right sides.

At the far end of the corridor, two tall steel doors gleamed, the kind that looked like they might open onto a warehouse. Near those doors, several carts and a small front-loader waited.

That would be where the mirror was, then, through those double doors.

She needed it. It was nonnegotiable.

And this red-tape-wielding, small-mean-souled twit clutching a fistful of her backpack was all that was standing between her and the small matter of her continued survival.

Her life depended on that crate.

And there was no other way she could get to it.

She twisted her shoulders, yanking her backpack from the woman's grasp. When it tumbled down her arm, she caught the straps of it in her hand.

Bracing herself, she gulped yet another fortifying breath. She was going to need this one.

Muttering a silent prayer that it would work and not actually injure the woman beyond a temporary black eye, she swung around and coshed the woman in the side of the head with her thirty-eight-pound-Krispy-Kremes-earning backpack.

Much to her relief—she wasn't entirely certain about doing it twice, no matter how nasty the witch was—Stone-face's eyes glazed, she swayed woozily, and sank limply to the floor.

Glancing hastily around, Jessi spied a door labeled "Supplies" down the hall. Grabbing the woman's feet, she hooked her ankles beneath her armpits and hurriedly slid her down the polished tile floor.

It took her a few moments to wedge her in with all the brooms and mops and cleaning supplies, but she managed it. Closing the door, she examined the handle. There was no way to lock it. That sucked.

And meant she had to hurry. She couldn't imagine the woman would stay out for very long.

Heart pounding, Jessi dashed off for the double doors and Cian.

Lucan slammed his fist through the silk-papered plaster wall of his study.

Again.

And a third time.

Blood beaded swiftly across his shredded knuckles and just as swiftly disappeared. The skin healed, not shiny and pink, but it healed.

He turned back toward his desk, glanced up at the offending darker rectangular spot on the wall, and snarled at the speakerphone, "Tell me again exactly what they said. In detail."

"None of them recalled many details, Mr. Trevayne, sir," Hans replied from the receiver. "Just that they saw a tall, tattooed man with dark braids carrying a large, gold-framed mirror, accompanied by a young, attractive woman, walking through the Sheraton's lobby on Friday morning. If the two of them stayed at the hotel, all records have been erased. One of the guest rooms was found with fresh human blood on the carpet, drapes, and furniture, but the hotel has no record of having assigned that room to anyone for several nights, and no body has been found."

Son of a bitch, the worst was true. Eve was most certainly dead and the Highlander was being aided and abetted by the St. James woman. They'd united efforts against him.

And he had less than seventeen days to find them.

"Were you able to learn where they went from there?"

"No, Mr. Trevayne, sir, we've not been able to ascertain that. We're working on it. Do you have any ideas, sir?"

Lucan rubbed his jaw. Where would Cian MacKeltar go, now that he had someone beyond the glass who was willing to help him get there? That was the determining factor, after all. The rules of their little game had changed dramatically. Not once in a thousand years had Lucan ever imagined that such an improbable sequence of events might ever come to pass—that something might shatter his unbreakable wards; that he might be out of the country at the time; that a thief might break into his home and steal the glass; that the glass might end up in the hands of someone willing to help the Keltar.

It reeked of preposterous synchronicity.

Nevertheless, it had happened.

Where would the Keltar go? There was no doubt in Lucan's mind: home to his Highlands, of course. The mountain-man would move heaven and earth to walk on Scots soil again, especially now.

It had been a long time since Lucan had visited the hills above Inverness. For countless generations, after he'd imprisoned Cian in the Dark Glass, he'd kept close tabs on the Keltar bloodline.

He'd wanted to be certain Cian's mother had done as she'd sworn in exchange for the continued health and well-being of her seven precious daughters: sealed away all Keltar lore from future generations and stricken her son's name from all Keltar annals—thereby preventing any future Keltar from nursing a blood-grudge and trying to free their ancestor.

But by the early fourteen hundreds, when his sources had confirmed that the MacKeltar—to the last man, woman, and child—believed the legendary Cian nothing more than a myth, Lucan had quit watching and quit caring.

He'd turned his attentions elsewhere, immersed himself in the building of his empire and his search for the remaining Dark Hallows.

Time and success had made him careless. He'd not been challenged in so long that complacency had dulled his edge.

Christ, seventeen days! It was unthinkable! He was so near to achieving his goals. He couldn't afford these idiotic distractions!

"Scotland, Hans," Lucan clipped at the phone. "Search Inverness. I suspect he'll bypass civilization and head for the hills. Find out if any MacKeltar still live in the area and let it be known I'm offering five million to whoever gets me that mirror, ten for the mirror *and* the woman. However, I must be informed the instant the mirror is located, and kept constantly apprised of its whereabouts. There's another ten million in it for you, Hans, if you bring this to successful completion within a week."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Trevayne, sir! I'll let the others know, sir. I'll get every man on it. I'll take care of this for you. You have my personal guarantee, sir!"

Lucan stared into space for a long time after he terminated the call. What was twenty-five million to him? Nothing. He'd wearied of wealth centuries ago. He wanted what he'd always wanted: more power.

He was so close to the culmination of all his dreams, a hairsbreadth away from finally possessing the Unseelie Dark Book. From finally being the greatest sorcerer the world had ever known, both mortal and Fae.

He should have seen these complications coming. He knew that when a man poised on the brink of achieving true greatness, the world tested him. It had happened to him before. It would happen again. He should have been better prepared this time. He would be in the future.

He, Lucan Myrddin Trevayne, fathered by an unknown Druid on a whore of a mother who'd lain with dozens of Druids from all over Great Britain during the course of a three-day council held in the tiny Welsh village of Cochlease, eleven hundred and seventy-eight years ago, had risen high above the ignominy of his birth and was *this close* to becoming powerful beyond his wildest dreams, able to command even the legendary Tuatha Dé Danaan themselves.

His earliest years had not been easy. He'd struggled, he'd worked, he'd studied, he'd traveled the world seeking knowledge and power. He'd transformed himself from the bastard son of a whore other Druids had refused to recognize, to a man respected and deeply feared by the mightiest among Druids and sorcerers alike.

It had been during those early years of travel that he'd learned of the Dark Hallows. He'd managed to secure rubbings from three sacred pages of the incredible Dark Book at the tender age of twenty-eight. He'd devoted the next eight years of his life to deciphering the encrypted rubbings.

Upon succeeding, he'd learned much from those rubbings, including the location of the Dark Glass of the Unseelie Fae, as well as the necessary tithing and the binding spells to use it. In exchange for the triple boon of the sacrifice of innocent blood, the ensorcellment of a captive, and a recurring tithe of pure gold, it bestowed eternal life.

It was rumored that Merlin himself had once possessed the Dark Glass, until it had been seized from him by an army a thousand strong and a mysterious group of Irish holy men.

Unfortunately, knowing where it was and how to use it hadn't been enough.

Lucan had tried four times to get to the Dark Glass. And four times he'd failed. The final time, he'd barely escaped with his life, and he'd been forced to concede that he simply didn't possess the power necessary to get past the

guardians.

He'd spent the next seven years of his life looking for someone who did. He'd found him in Cian MacKeltar.

He'd hated the Highlander on first sight.

Jessica lay facedown in a pool of blood, her glossy black curls wetly matted to her head.

She was bled white, stiff and icy in death. Her spine was drawn in a painful bow, her right leg splayed at an impossible angle. Her left arm was bent awkwardly over her head, the underside of the wrist down, the palm twisted gruesomely up. Her other hand was clenched in a bloody fist.

It was obvious she'd suffered as she'd died. Not just pain. Horrific pain.

She'd cried out for him.

She'd never stopped believing he would save her.

He'd told her that he would; that he would be her shield—he'd vowed to stand between her and all others.

He'd failed.

Pounding the wall with his fists, Cian tossed back his head and howled like an animal. The sound echoed from walls of stone, ricocheted off a stone ceiling, bounced back at him from a stone floor.

One thousand one hundred and thirty-three years had not driven him insane.

But the past two days had managed to accomplish what eleven centuries had not.

She was out there, his Jessica, with only her wits and will to rely upon. And he was trapped in the mirror, unable to protect her.

From the moment the Dark Glass had reclaimed him, the terrible possibilities had begun playing themselves, with chilling detail, in never-ending repetition through his mind.

An assassin had slipped onto the plane and into the seat behind them, then taken her captive the moment she'd disembarked. She was, even now, drugged and on her way to London.

Nay—the bloody frigging plane had simply plummeted from the air, crashing thousands of miles to the ocean below, sinking like a stone. He didn't understand how the hell it stayed up there, anyway. It might have wings, but they didn't flap. (This was the kindest of his hells; she suffered no indignities and death came more swiftly in this than any others.)

Nay—when his mirror was next uncovered, it would be to discover himself once again hung upon Lucan's study wall, staring down at his beautiful Jessica, tied and gagged, being raped and tortured by his ancient enemy.

Nay—when his mirror was next uncovered, he would see only Lucan's hated face and the bastard would do the same thing he'd done to him with word of Cian's mother and sisters—never utter a word about Jessica again, no matter how Cian pleaded, leaving him to imagine the worst of all possibles *every single day* for the rest of his eternal existence.

Each hellish possibility was worse than the last, slicing like a sword into his gut.

Cian slumped down against the wall, hands fisted, jaw clenched.

Waiting. Waiting.

“Aha—*there* you are!” Jessi exclaimed brightly, as she rounded the corner. “Finally!” A dozen yards away, at the end of the very last row (did it ever work any other way?) with the words **UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY** emblazoned in red across it, between a few dozen smaller stampings of the word *FRAGILE*, the tall plywood crate perched on end.

She glanced anxiously at her watch. It had taken her forever to find him. She was afraid that any minute now Stone-face was going to come crashing through the doors behind her, with half of Edinburgh's Airport Security in tow.

When she'd first pushed through those double doors, she'd expected to find a small storehouse, not an industrial warehouse that stretched the length of a football field, with tiers that climbed all the way to a forty-foot ceiling, and row

after row of numbered boxes, crates, and assorted packages.

She'd wasted precious time searching aisles of numbered items, before deducing that the unnumbered items lacking tickets were probably stored at the far end of the humongous building because the staff knew no one would be collecting them anytime soon.

The crate must have been the most recent arrival, as it was all the way down in the final spot at the end of the row. Sprinting toward it, she called out the summoning spell. "*Lialth bree che bree, Cian MacKeltar, drachme se-sidh!*"

Nothing happened.

She repeated the chant, expecting light to blaze from the cracks, and the crate to begin rocking or something.

Again nothing.

Drawing to a breathless halt in front of it, she pressed her ear to the wood panel. "Cian?" she called. She glanced warily over her shoulder. Despite the vastness of the warehouse and her apparent solitude within it, she was nonetheless reluctant to make a commotion. Squaring her shoulders, she opted for something more than an exclamation but less than a shout: "*Cian!*"

She pressed her ear to the plywood again. Was that a muffled roar? She listened a moment. Sure sounded like it. Yup, there was another.

She drew back and pounded on the crate with her fists. "Cian, I'm here! Can you hear me? Come on! Get your butt out here *now!* We have to hurry. I don't know how long we have before they find us. *Lialth bree che bree, Cian MacKeltar, drachme se-sidh!*"

Total silence.

Just when she'd begun to think something must have gone seriously wrong en route, or she had the wrong crate or something, brilliant light blazed from the cracks, the warehouse felt even larger than it was, and she heard the rustle of inner packing.

A powerful fist splintered through the wood half an inch from her left ear.

Blinking, Jessi scrambled back.

He heard her, calling him.

At first Cian thought her voice was but another figment of his tortured imaginings, then it snapped impatiently, “Get your butt out here *now!*” and he laughed aloud. She was his prickly Jessica; they’d made it to Scotland, and she was freeing him again.

Pushing against masses of packing and cushion-wrap, he shoved from the mirror and turned his body into a battering ram.

He crashed a fist through the wood, then another, kicked and pounded at the crating with all the caged fury and impotent rage that had been riding him for two endless days.

He demolished the front of the crate, ripping it to shreds with his bare hands.

When he glanced up from the splinters, it was to find Jessica backed up flush to a shelving unit, staring at him, her face pale.

“Och, Christ, woman,” he hissed. Devouring the space between them in two strides, he cupped her jaw with one big hand, tipped her face up, and claimed her mouth in a kiss. Once, twice, three times. Then he drew back and glared down at her. “I thought you were dead. I couldn’t *fucking* get out of there and I thought of a thousand things I’d done wrong and imagined a million deaths for you. Kiss me, Jessica. Show me you’re alive.”

Jessi blinked up at Cian, stunned.

Kiss me, Jessica, his words hung in the air. *Show me you’re alive*.

When he’d come crashing out of the crate, for a moment she’d genuinely thought he’d gone crazy, so stark and inhuman was the expression in his eyes. Then he’d turned a look on her that had scorched right through her clothing, her skin, seared all the way to her bones, and before he’d even spoken, she’d known it had been fear for *her* that had put that wildness in him.

She’d been stunned. She’d been secretly thrilled. Because, although she’d been refusing to admit it even to herself, the whole time she’d been sitting in the

airport, trying to figure out a way to get to him, she'd been suppressing an ever-growing panic, and not just because he was her best chance of staying alive. Somehow, it had gotten personal. A thousand worries had been plaguing her. Worries about *him*: Where was he? Was he okay? What if the mirror had inadvertently gotten broken? Would he die? Would he be stuck in there forever?

What if Lucan had somehow gotten his hands on him? How would she find him? Would she have to hunt down this scary Lucan guy and steal Cian back?

What if she never saw the towering, dark, infuriatingly barbaric, sexy Highlander again?

It's just hormones. Combustive chemistry compounded by danger, nothing more.

Whatever it was, his reaction was playing right into a fantasy she'd not even known she'd been having: that when she found him he would not merely stalk out of that mirror to save her, he would stalk out of it to *claim* her. Crush her against the steely, hard strength of his body, and take slick velvety possession of her with his tongue. Give her the most base, elemental affirmation that he was alive, and she was alive, and they lived to fight another day.

It was, she realized, how women throughout all of history must have felt each time their men returned from battle on their own two feet, not bound over the back of a horse, or piled, dozens deep, atop a wagon.

Desperate for every morsel of passion life had to offer.

Or, at least, for a few steamy kisses, anyway. Surely there was no harm in a few kisses . . .

Famous final words, she would think later.

She tipped her head back and wet her lips. He needed no further encouragement. Whisky eyes glittering with lust, he cupped the back of her head with a big palm and slanted his mouth over hers.

The moment their lips met this time, heat lightning crackled between them and they both went wild.

She'd seen crazy passion in movies, but had never experienced it herself. She did now.

Wriggling her backpack off her shoulders, she molded herself against him, trying to get closer. He thrust back in kind, pressing his thick, hard erection against her stomach. She tried to scramble up his body, but her impromptu climbing attempt threw him off balance. He overcorrected and they banged against the metal shelving, then bounced off it.

Careening across the aisle, they stumbled and staggered over crate debris and crashed to the concrete floor.

Yet never broke the kiss.

Clamping her face between his big hands, he claimed her with hot, deep glides of his tongue. Closing his teeth over her lower lip, he gave it a gentle tug followed by a not-so-gentle suck, before resuming his sleek, erotic slides into the slick interior of her mouth.

He teased her with slow rhythmic thrusts, plunging in and out, and she sucked frantically at his tongue, as if it were some other part of him she was trying to capture and take deep inside her. He let her suckle him for a moment, growling soft and low in his throat, then he dragged his mouth away, lightly chafing his shadow-beard across her jaw, nipping the edge of it. He trailed scorching kisses down her throat, then bit her in the hollow where her shoulder met her neck, catching the tendon with his teeth.

She sucked in a hissing breath, her back arching, straining up against him. She tipped back her head, yielding greater access.

Pushing impatiently at the collar of her jean jacket, he bared her skin and scattered tiny love-bites over her shoulder, riding the fine edge between not-enough and almost-too-much.

She had a sneaking suspicion Cian MacKeltar rode that edge a lot.

God, what was happening to her? she wondered dimly. She was going to tell him they needed to hurry and get out of there. That Stone-face was coming. That Security was no doubt on its way. Just a few more kisses and she was going to tell him all of that. Any minute now . . .

She tugged at his shirt, worked her hands beneath it, gliding them up his sexy, sculpted abdomen, slipping them around to his magnificently muscled back.

He shoved his hands beneath her sweater, subtly shifting so the hot, hard ridge of his erection was cradled snugly between her thighs.

We have to go now, she was going to tell him. "I can't breathe," she told him. "You're too big. I want to be on top."

He made a half-choking, half-laughing sound and rolled her over on top of him. She slipped into a straddling position and glanced down, eyes widening. His bulge was straining the fabric of his faded jeans and he was worryingly large.

"Take off that damn jacket."

But we need to go, she opened her mouth to say. Except just as she was about to form the words, he pressed the pad of his finger to her parted lips, and she ended up nipping the tip of his finger then sucking it into her mouth.

He groaned, eyes narrowing, gaze fixed heatedly on her mouth.

She shrugged the jacket from her shoulders. When he tugged at her sweater, she raised her arms above her head and yielded that too. Her breasts sprang free, jiggling, her nipples hardening into tight puckers.

Beneath her, Cian stared up, lust stringing his gut tighter than a corded bow about to shoot wildly into anything that moved.

Bloody hell, she was magnificent!

She sat astride him, her lush, heavy breasts bobbing and swaying, and she was so ripely curved that a man could come just looking at her. Her skin was silk and cream, and he knew she was going to feel that way all over, inside and out. More creamy in some places than others, and he couldn't wait to taste all of them. Her breasts were full, high, and sexy as hell. Her nipples were hard pink peaks swaying above his face. Abs contracting, he reared up from the concrete floor, caught those pretty boobs with his hands, and drew a nipple deep into his hot, wet mouth. He tugged lightly, gave it a delicate scrape with his teeth, savoring the pearly hardness of it with a lingering swirl of his tongue.

Back arching, Jessi buried her hands in Cian's braids, moaning as he used his unshaven jaw to gently abrade the sensitive skin of her damp, kiss-puckered peaks. Then he started licking with slow, lazily erotic strokes of his tongue until she was squirming and wiggling impatiently on top of him. Turning his head

from side to side between her breasts, he teased her nipples mercilessly with light flicks, intermittently taking tiny nips beneath the hard pink points.

Her breasts ached from his slow, teasing strokes. She needed more friction. She wanted his mouth closed firmly on them, his fingers pinching and rolling, the rake of his teeth. She wanted hot and hard and demanding. She wanted claiming.

She was so turned-on that she was achy, needy with it. His tongue flicked across one nipple, then the next as he doled out more of those torturously light caresses. "Please, Cian, *more*," she whimpered.

She lost her breath in a *whoosh of air when he pushed her off him and flipped her onto her back.*

A hot purr rumbled deep in his throat.

The concrete felt cool in contrast to the burning heat of her skin. Lowering himself over her, he propped his formidable weight with his palms splayed at each side of her body. Burying his face in her breasts, he—oh, thank you, finally—drew one nipple after the next deep into his mouth. He suckled. He nipped. He rolled the taut buds between his tongue and his upper palate, scraping gently with the edges of his teeth. Shifting his weight to one forearm, he slipped his hand down to work at her jeans.

"Cian," she gasped.

"Aye, lass?" His mouth moved lower, trailing hot, wet kisses over her tummy, pausing at her navel to dip in and lave it.

"Oh, God, Cian!" She twisted her hips to give him slack in the waistband of her denim second-skin.

*A few moments later, a soft, wicked laugh escaped him and she knew he'd just unbuttoned her jeans and seen the words **LUCKY YOU** emblazoned in gold down the inner fabric of the fly.*

"So that's why they're called *Lucky* jeans," he murmured.

"Uh-hmmm," she managed.

"You'll get no argument from me, lass. I ken I'm a lucky man." He paused. "Woman," he said then, "I'm going to make you forget every other man you've

ever known.”

“But—”

“Hush.” Then his demanding mouth was hot on her body again, scattering tiny love-bites over the delicate skin of her hips as he peeled her jeans down inch by inch.

She didn’t hear them—the people approaching.

She was too lost in an erotic haze for anything to penetrate.

Fortunately, Cian heard the furious voice snapping, “Did you hear that? I’m telling you, she’s back there!”

Jerking back from her, he cocked his head, listening. Abruptly, he tugged her into a sitting position and began yanking her jeans back up over her hips.

Befuddled, dazed by desire, Jessi sat up on the cool concrete, gaping at him.

Someone comes, he mouthed, miming a gesture to be silent. He stood, hoisted her into midair by the waistband of her jeans, and jiggled her back into them, the muscles in his arms bunching and rippling.

His eyes glazed over a little when he shook her, and he got a wild look in them. He turned sharply away, leaving her to fasten them. After a long moment, he turned back with her sweater and helped her tug it over her head.

It was so snug it got stuck above her breasts.

His eyes took on a stark, defeated expression. He backed away, unbuttoning his jeans. Jamming a hand down the front, he sucked in a slow hissing breath and repositioned himself.

She finished squeezing herself back into the sweater and slipped on her jean-jacket. Scooping up her backpack, she slung it over her shoulders.

The rat-a-tat-tat of high heels tapped a brisk staccato across the concrete floor, drawing ever nearer, accompanied by softer-soled shoes—many of them.

God, she’d completely forgotten about Stone-face! In a matter of minutes. Kissed brainless once again. What in the world was wrong with her? How could a

man's touch so utterly obliterate the calm, cool intellect and impressive powers of reason on which she'd once prided herself?

She frowned at him, eyes narrowed, trying to figure out what it was that Cian MacKeltar had that no other man had.

She was familiar with the theory that women were instinctively sexually attracted to men who were their most favorable genetic complement; men who possessed the DNA that would strengthen hers, and vice versa, thereby guaranteeing stronger children and ensuring the human race's greatest odds of survival.

Was Cian MacKeltar biologically her most favorable match? Was she doomed to be hopelessly and helplessly attracted to him? Was Nature herself conspiring against her in some diabolical evolutionary plan to get her pregnant?

If so, a devilish little inner voice proposed, then we should probably just sleep with him and get it over with, huh? Don't you think?

"Nice try," Jessi muttered.

Though the anthropologist in her appreciated the logic of the theory, she greatly preferred to believe that love and sex were matters of level-headed choice and free will.

There wasn't a single thing levelheaded or remotely free-willish about her response to Cian MacKeltar.

"I can't imagine what she's doing back there!" Stone-face was saying. "Can you? Did you hear that noise? She's like a wild little animal. She didn't just hit me. She brutally assaulted me. I hope she has an attorney, because she's going to need one. I'm suing. My face might never be the same. I'm probably going to need plastic surgery."

Oh puh-leeze. Jessi snorted.

Cian glanced at her, the raw sexual frustration in his dark amber gaze tempered by amusement.

You hit her? he mouthed.

I had to get to you somehow, she mouthed back, wrinkling her nose. Smoothing her sweater. Trying not to blush, remembering what they'd just done and, worse

still, what they'd been about to do. Good grief, she thought crossly, maybe she should just throw her virginity at him the next time.

Oh, gee, wait a minute, she'd just tried to do that.

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. He stepped closer, ducked his head, and pressed his mouth to her ear. He kissed the dainty ridges, tasting it lightly with his tongue. "You'd do a Highland husband proud, lass," he whispered.

She shivered from the hot eroticism of his tongue against her ear. "Thanks," she whispered back. Coming from a ninth-century warrior-Druid, that was quite a compliment. "I knocked her out with a single blow too." She couldn't help but brag on herself a little bit.

His shoulders shook harder.

"So, Mr. Druid-turned-dark-sorcerer, we're in a bit of a fix. Think you can get us out of here?"

He tossed back his head and laughed out loud. The deep sound rumbled from his chest, echoing in the warehouse.

"Did you hear that?" From a few aisles away, Stone-face sounded scandalized. "There's a man in here with her! How in the world did that creature get a man in here with her?"

Cian flashed Jessi a cocky, sexy smile that couldn't have been more full of himself. It was the smile of a man who knew his power and thoroughly enjoyed having it.

"Aye, I can. Just you sit back, woman, and relax. I'll take care of everything."

Jessi had no doubt that he could. And, damn, but she liked that in a man.

Scotland: bounded by the Atlantic, the North Sea, and England; approximately half the size of its neighbor; comprised primarily of moors, mountains, and seven hundred and eighty-seven major islands, including the Shetlands, Orkneys, and the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

Jessi's sticky memory made her a lint brush for facts.

She knew that if one were to draw a straight line from the far south of the rugged country to the far north of it, it was a mere 275 miles, although its coastline covered a scenic 6,200 miles.

She also knew that the true collision of England and Scotland had predated the clash of politics and hot tempers by some 425 million years, when continental drift had caused Scotland—previously part of a landmass that had included North America—and England—previously part of Gondwana—to collide into each other, not far from the current political boundary.

A historical treasure trove, Scotland was close to the top of a lengthy list of places Jessi had long wanted to see, along with Ireland, Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and all of what had once been part of ancient Gaul where the P-Celts had so passionately lived and loved and warred.

Still, she reflected, swerving to avoid a pothole in the meandering, single-lane dirt road, she'd never imagined she'd make it to Great Britain so soon.

And certainly not as a hunted fugitive, in the company of a ninth-century Highlander, driving a big black stolen SUV into the Highlands.

Cian was back in the mirror now, and being downright pissy about it.

She wasn't. She was relieved that it had sucked him back in so soon after he'd used Voice to escape the airport and commandeered their "rental" vehicle.

Twice now, she'd nearly given him her virginity. In fact, had they not been

interrupted, she would have either time.

She didn't understand it. She was a woman who did nothing without a solid, well-thought-out reason. She knew the largest part of why she hadn't slept with a man yet was because she'd watched her mother go through four husbands. She had three sisters, fourteen stepsiblings (some of them step-steps from the man's earlier marriage), a bad case of cynicism, and an intense need for commitment as a result.

She adored her mother, and if anyone dared criticize Lilly St. James, Jessi would slice and dice 'em. Nobody put down her mom.

She even liked all of her stepsiblings.

But she hated having such a complicated family; it was one of the reasons she'd left Maine for Chicago and stayed there, preferring long talks on the phone every Sunday with Lilly to being fully consumed by the chaos that was the St. James household. Though not currently married, her mom was dating again, and sometimes that was worse than suddenly getting a few extra brothers and sisters who borrowed clothing and car keys with teenage impunity.

Birthday dinners and graduations inevitably turned into scheduling disasters. Holidays were a nightmare. Jessi would never be able to fathom her mom's idea of marital commitment. A commercial realtor, Lilly treated the sacred vows of matrimony like any of her other "deals": a short-term contract with an option to renew—that she rarely exercised.

Jessi was getting married once. Having babies with one man. Three or four kids would be just fine; maybe a boy and two girls who would never suffer any confusion about who they were related to, and how, not to mention the often-baffling whys. Her mom had picked a few strange ones from the parade of boyfriends.

Jessi wanted a small, insular, well-tended world. The fewer people one tried to love, Jessi believed, the better one could love them. She was a quality girl, not a quantity one.

Yet, with Cian MacKeltar, all her well-thought-out prequalifiers for relationships went sailing right out the window.

He looked at her—she got wet.

He touched her—she melted.

He kissed her—her clothing started coming off.

She couldn't come up with a single reason for it. Yes, he was sexy. Yes, he was pure male and—so what if it wasn't in keeping with the current feminist movement that seemed to prefer emasculated men—she *liked* manliness in a man. Liked them a little rough around the edges, a little untamed. Yes, he was fascinating, and she really couldn't wait to get him somewhere that she could pick his brain about the ninth century, and find out just what had happened to him eleven centuries ago.

But he was also a logistic impossibility.

He was currently living in a mirror. He was a sorcerer with a blood-grudge against another sorcerer. And he was *way older than she was*.

He wasn't the marrying kind. Not even the keeping kind. And she knew it.

But despite all that, whenever he touched her, she instantly began de-evolving into one of her primitive ancestors, driven by the three basic prime directives: eat, sleep, have sex. Though if she were going to line those directives up in the order *she* would enjoy them, it would be sex first, while she felt skinny and her tummy was at its flattest, then food with lots of decadently sedating carbs, then sleep. Then wake up and have sex again, with the added benefit of working off some carbs. So she could eat again.

But that was neither here nor there.

Here was a man she couldn't seem to keep her hands off of.

And no doubt when he came out of that mirror, they were going to fall on each other again. And she wasn't going to be able to count on an interruption way up in the desolate hills where he was taking her, unless a meteor were to serendipitously plummet from the sky, or they were overrun by marauding sheep.

"I'm sliding again, lass," came the disgruntled growl from the seat beside her. "Naught but a view of the ceiling over here."

Jessi slowed and pulled over to the side of the road. When they'd gotten into the SUV, Cian had originally positioned the mirror across the two back rows of

seats, then slid into the front passenger's seat. But when the Dark Glass had reclaimed him less than an hour outside of Edinburgh, en route to Inverness, he'd instructed her to push the front seat back as far as it would go—which was pretty far in the roomy SUV—tug the looking glass forward, prop it at an angle, and strap it in with the seat belt so he could see where they were going. *I'm uncertain of the terrain, lass, he'd told her. I know where I want to go, but I doona ken how it will look after the passage of so much time. There will be roads and buildings and such that weren't there before; however, I should be able to identify the mountains if I can get a good-enough view.*

Unfortunately, the seat belt was designed to hold a person with assorted person-sized bumps and lumps, not a flat mirror, and the glass kept slipping down into a more horizontal position. If she'd had a single piece of luggage, she might have crammed it at the base of the frame, on the floor, but as it was, they were traveling outlaw-light. The only things in the SUV were three empty fast-food bags from the lunch they'd grabbed at the airport and a handful of maps and pamphlets he'd snatched from a newsstand while leaving.

As she leaned over to adjust it yet again, he muttered something in that mysterious language of his, and suddenly a book tumbled out of the mirror, narrowly missing her nose, followed by several more. She ducked out of the way. She'd broken her nose once already, that day at the climbing gym, and it was crooked enough, tipping slightly to the left.

“Wedge them at the base,” he commanded.

She blinked. “You have books in there?”

“I've accumulated a few items over the centuries. Things I believed Lucan wouldn't miss. Once stolen and in transit, when the opportunity presented itself, I picked up still more.”

She arranged the books at the foot of the mirror, laying them end to end, gawking at the titles: Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*; Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*; Pliny's *Natural History*; *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Universe*; and *Geographica*, a massive book of maps and charts.

“Like a little light reading, huh?” she muttered. Personally, she went for Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series (she was a Ranger-girl herself) or any Linda Howard book, on those rare occasions she got to read for pleasure. Which was

like once a year.

“I have endeavored to keep up with the passage of the centuries.”

She glanced into the mirror. After seeing him in the flesh only a short time ago, it was weird to be seeing him as a one-dimensional, flat figure in the glass. She didn't like it at all. She was beginning to resent that mirror. Resent that it could take him back anytime it wanted to. She shook her head. A few minutes ago she'd been glad it had reclaimed him. Now she was irritated that it had. Would she ever be of a single mind around him? “For the day you'd finally be free? That's why you kept up?”

He stared down at her, burnt-whisky gaze unfathomable. “Aye.”

Free. After eleven centuries, the ninth-century Highlander was going to be free in a little over two weeks. “Seventeen more days,” Jessi breathed wonderingly. “God, you must be climbing the . . . er, walls . . . or whatever's in there, huh?”

“Aye.”

“So, just what is in there, anyway?” She tested the glass by shaking it gently, and deemed it secure enough. It shouldn't slide now.

“Stone,” he said flatly.

“And what else?”

“Stone. Gray. Of varying sizes.” His voice dropped to a colorless monotone. “Fifty-two thousand nine hundred and eighty-seven stones. Twenty-seven thousand two hundred and sixteen of them are a slightly paler gray than the rest. Thirty-six thousand and four are more rectangular than square. There are nine hundred and eighteen that have a vaguely hexagonal shape. Ninety-two of them have a vein of bronze running through the face. Three are cracked. Two paces from the center is a stone that protrudes slightly above the rest, over which I tripped for the first few centuries. Any other questions?”

Jessi flinched as his words impacted her, taking her breath away. Her chest and throat felt suddenly tight. Uh, yeah, like, how did you stay sane in there? What kept you from going stark raving mad? How did you survive over a thousand years in such a hell?

She didn't ask because it would have been like asking a mountain why it was

still standing, as it had been since the dawn of time, perhaps reshaped in subtle ways, but there, always there. Barring cataclysmic planetary upheaval, forever there.

The man was strong—not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. A rock of a man, the kind a woman could lean on through the worst of times and never have to worry that things might fall apart, because a man like him simply wouldn't let them. She never met anyone like Cian before. Twenty-first-century society wasn't conducive to churning out alpha males. What did a man have to hone himself on nowadays, test himself against, build character on? Conquering the latest video game? Buying the right suit and tie? Smacking little white balls around a manicured garden with ridiculously expensive sticks? Doing battle over the parking space nearest the store?

“Nope,” she managed. “No other questions.”

Eleven centuries of captivity. Hung on his hated enemy's study wall. Eleven centuries of not touching. Not eating. Not loving. Had he had anyone to talk to?

Her face must have betrayed her thoughts, for he startled her by saying softly, “’Tis no longer of consequence, lass, but thank you for the compassion. ’Tis nigh over. Seventeen more days, Jessica. That's all.”

For some reason his words brought a sudden hot burn of tears to the backs of her eyes. Not only hadn't eleven centuries turned him into a monster, he was trying to soothe her, to make her feel better about his imprisonment.

“You weep for me, woman?”

She turned away. “It's been a long day. Hell, it's been a long week.”

“Jessica.” Her name was a soft command.

She disobeyed it, staring out the window at the rolling hills.

“Jessica, look at me.”

Eyes bright with unshed tears, she whipped her head around and glared at him. “I weep for you, okay?” she snapped. “For eleven centuries stuck in there. Can I start driving again or do you need something else?”

He smiled faintly, raised his hand, and splayed his palm against the inside of the

silvery glass.

Without an ounce of conscious thought, her hand rose to meet his, aligning on the cool silver, palm to palm, finger to finger, thumb to thumb. And though she felt only a cold hardness beneath her palm, the gesture made something go all warm and soft in her heart.

Neither of them spoke or moved for a moment.

Then she glanced hastily away, fished a napkin from the fast-food bags, blew her nose, shifted into drive, and resumed their winding ascent into the rugged Scottish Highlands.

Gloaming in the Highlands.

It had taken him most of the day to find the caves he'd played in as a lad.

The terrain had changed greatly over the past thousand years, and new roads and homes had made it difficult to recognize landmarks he'd once thought immutable and uniquely unmistakable. Even mountains looked different when one was gazing up at them from the busy streets of a city, as opposed to regarding them across a wide-open expanse of sheep-dotted field.

Unwilling to permit her to enter the caves until he had a chance to explore them for potential animal or erosive threats, he'd bade her prop the mirror securely next to the entrance to the stone lair so he could keep close watch on the vista around her. Armed with knives and guns, he was prepared for any threat, though he truly doubted one would come this evening, or even the next.

Now, from high atop a rugged mountain, Cian stared out of the Dark Glass at two of the loveliest sights that had ever graced his existence: Scotland at a fiery dusk and Jessica St. James.

His beloved country made a worthy backdrop for the woman.

Sitting cross-legged, facing him, scarce a foot beyond his glass, her short, glossy black curls were backlit by flaming crimson and gold, her forehead and cheekbones dusted burnt rose, her lips plush red velvet. Pretty white teeth flashed when she smiled, her eyes lit with an inner fire that nigh matched the sky behind her when she laughed.

She'd been laughing often as they'd talked. She was a woman who seemed able to find something humorous in nearly all things, even her own grim lot right now, which was a warrior's strength in Cian's estimation. Fear accomplished nothing. Nor did regret—sweet Christ, he knew that. All the regret in the world wouldn't change a damn thing now. Not what had been. Nor what would be.

Still, humor and tenacity could frequently see one through the most difficult of times, and she possessed both in spades.

At his urging, she'd been telling him about her trials and tribulations while trying to reclaim his mirror at the airport.

When she grew excited about one part or another, she spoke with her hands, accompanying her words with gestures, and her fingertips would brush his glass. He was so physically attuned to her that it gave him the kiss of a shiver each time, as if she were brushing her fingers against *him*, not a cool mirror.

For the first time in over a millennium, he got to watch the night take his Highlands—a thing he'd missed fiercely—yet he found himself savoring even more listening to Jessica's tale, laughing at the images she painted for him. He could see this wee hellion vaulting over the counter, bashing the contrary woman, and stuffing her in a closet. There was a bit of a heathen inside Jessica St. James.

It was just one more thing he liked about the lass, he thought, smiling faintly.

He stared, drinking her in, his smile fading. She had his plaid draped around her shoulders, and was snuggled into its warmth as the sun worked its way slowly down to kiss the dark ridge of mountains filling the horizon. It did something to him, seeing her in his tartan. Though it wasn't the Keltar weave or colors, only a bit of Scots-woven cloth he'd swiped centuries ago, heartsick for his home, he still thought of it as his. 'Twas as if she belonged in it. Crimson and black suited her well. She was a vibrant woman, fashioned by a generous creator of bold jewel tones: jade and raven and rose and skin of sun-kissed gold.

They'd been talking for some time now. For the first time since they'd cast their lots together, all manner of calamity was not erupting around them. He could do nothing further to ensure her safety at this time from inside the mirror, so he'd seized the opportunity to learn more about Jessica St. James.

Where had she grown up? Did she have clan? How many, who, and where were

they? What was she learning at her university? What kind of things did she one day dream of doing?

I'm learning about digging in the dirt, she'd told him with a cheeky smile, and that's what I one day dream of doing. Once she'd explained what she really meant, he realized 'twas but another thing that drew him to her. She was curious as a Druid about things. In his mind's eye he could see her toiling in the soil for treasures of the past, delightedly unearthing pottery shards and bits of armor and weapons. Och, Christ, how he'd like to be there beside her while she did it! To tell her stories of those things she found and, later, take her beneath him and show her another real, live artifact.

If she could have anything in the world, he'd asked her, what would it be?

She'd answered that one without hesitation: a best friend. She'd hastily added, *a truly, seriously best friend; one that I couldn't wait to talk to first thing in the morning as soon as I woke up, and one that I still wanted to be talking to, right up to the last minute before I went to sleep.*

He'd smiled faintly. You mean a soul mate, he'd thought but not said. She'd meant a man, a lifetime lover. He could see it in her eyes.

Now she was telling him how she'd decided to be an archaeologist; that she'd read a book when she was young that had inspired her and set her on her path.

He listened intently, watched intently. He fancied he could sit like this for two eternities, mayhap more, drinking her in. He wanted to hear the minute details of her life, to know as much of this woman as he possibly could.

"So there I was, in college, second year into my major, realizing that it wasn't going to be like Anne Rice's book The Mummy at all. That it wasn't glamour and travel and the thrill of discovery. That it was really a lot of grunt work and paperwork. Most archaeologists never get to dig in the dirt."

"But by then it was too late," she told him with a sheepish smile, "I'd fallen in love with it for totally different reasons. I'd gotten addicted to the history. I'd been sucked in by the mysteries of our origins, of the world's origins, of trying to piece together the big picture."

She spoke of Druid things now, the things that had always fascinated him. Life was full of tiny slices of truth and knowledge, here and there, and a wise man or

woman endeavored to collect them.

An unwise man endeavored to collect other things. Like Unseelie Hallows.

And paid the price. Och, Christ, and paid the price!

“My mother hates my choice of major,” she confided. “She can’t understand why I’m not married and popping out babies left and right. She can’t imagine how I could prefer to spend time with artifacts when I could be out trying to find a husband.”

His gut twisted. *Out trying to find a husband. He hated those words. They pissed him off to the last sorcerous, fiery drop of blood in his veins. “Why have you no man?” he said tightly.*

Her smile faded. She was quiet a moment. Then she smiled again, but this one was softer, older than her years, and achingly bittersweet. “I think I’m misplaced in time, Cian. I think that’s part of the reason I’m drawn to the past. I’m an old-fashioned girl. My mother has had four husbands and she’s already looking for the next.”

“Do they die, lass?” he asked. He wondered if she had any idea what she did to him, sitting there like that. Plaid soft and rumpled around her shoulders, her dainty hands relaxed in her lap, her palms upward, fingers half-curved. She was utterly unself-conscious, reflective, her shimmering jade gaze turned inward.

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “They just seem to decide they don’t love each other anymore. If they ever did. Usually she leaves them.”

“And they let her?” Were mother aught like her daughter, ’twas unfathomable that a man would let her go, inconceivable that a husband wouldn’t do all in his power to make her happy, to breathe life into every last one of his woman’s dreams.

He would never understand modern marriages. Divorce was beyond his comprehension. Though at times he made light of it, the truth was, a Keltar Druid lived for his binding vows and the day he could give them.

For him, that day would never come. But for him, many days would never come. Canceled out by too many days gone wrong.

“I doona ken it, Jessica. Love, once given, is forever. It canna simply go away.

Do they not love her, these men she marries?"

She shrugged, looking as baffled by it as he felt. "I don't know. I wonder sometimes if people even know what love is anymore. Some days, when I'm watching my friends at school change lovers as unperturbedly as they change shoes, I think the world just got filled with too many people, and all our technological advances made things so easy that it cheapened our most basic, essential values somehow," she told him. "It's like spouses are commodities nowadays: disposable, constantly getting tossed back out for trade on the market, and everyone's trying to trade up, up—like there is a 'trading up' in love." She rolled her eyes. "No way. That's not for me. I'm having one husband. I'm getting married once. When you know going in that you're staying for life, it makes you think harder about it, go slower, choose really well."

When she fell pensively silent, Cian smiled bitterly, brooding over the vagaries of fate. Jessica St. James was strong, impassioned, true of heart, funny, fierce, and sexy as hell.

She was perfect for him. Right down to his frustrating inability to deep-read her or compel her. She, alone, was forever beyond his magic, that wild talent that had always made his life so easy. Too damnably easy. Dangerously easy.

This woman had been custom-crafted for a man of his ilk.

"What about you?" she said finally. "Were you married in your century?"

He didn't miss the shadow that flickered in her lovely sparkling eyes. She didn't like the thought that he might have been wed. She didn't like the thought of him loving another woman. That knowledge eased some of the pain in that twisted place in his gut. A twisted place that he knew would only grow worse again, and continue to worsen, day by day. "Nay, lass. I'd not found the woman for me before I was imprisoned in the Dark Glass."

Her brow furrowed and she looked as if she would pursue that thought further, but then she seemed to change her mind. "God, there are so many questions I keep wanting to ask you but I never seem to get around to them! How old are you, anyway? I mean, excluding the time you've been in the mirror."

"A score and ten. I'd gained a new year shortly before I was imprisoned. And you?"

“Twenty-four.”

“In my time, you would have—”

“I know, I know, I would have been an old maid, right?” She laughed. “You and my mother.”

“Nay,” he told her, “you’d not have been unwed. Like as not, you’d have been on your third or fourth husband. Beauty such as yours would have been highly sought by the richest men in the land. Unfortunately, they were often the oldest.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly and her lips moved. “ ‘Beauty such as—’ ” She broke off with a blush. “Thank you,” she said softly. Then she flashed him a cheeky smile. “Ugh. Great. I get married; he dies. I get married; he dies. And it’s not like I would have been left a wealthy widow to do what I wanted, either. Some male relative would have just married me off again, wouldn’t he? Keeping me in the family so they could hold the dowry and lands?”

Cian nodded. “Though my clan was not so barbaric. Having seven sisters who could all talk at once—and *very loudly when fashed—taught me a thing or two.*”

Jessica laughed. They both fell silent.

Then she opened her mouth, shut it. Hesitated, then opened it again. Leaning forward, she said in a hushed voice, “How did it happen, Cian? How did you end up in the mirror?”

He drew ripples of silver around him, sliding deeper into his prison.

“Another time,” he said. Though, on occasion, some perverse part of him seemed determined to make her think the worst of him, he relished the intimacy taking root between them. He had no desire to besmirch it with tales of ancient sins. “For now sleep, sweet Jessica. We have much to do on the morrow.”

Later that night, Cian stood naked behind the silvery Unseelie veil, armed with knives and guns, watching over Jessica as she slept.

Clad in an assortment of oversized garments, she was curled on a pallet of his clothing at the foot of the mirror. Over the centuries, he’d accumulated various items of attire. As full night had fallen and the temperature dropped still more,

he'd tossed out every last piece of it to her, right down to the jeans and T-shirt he'd been wearing, in an effort to warm her against the chilly October night.

Sleep was obsolete within his mirror, as were all physical needs. He would stand guard until she awoke. He'd made her as safe as he could for now. It was not nearly as safe as he could and would make her, using any and all means at his disposal, no matter the cost.

It was the truth that they had much to do on the coming day. On the morrow, they would return to Inverness and gather supplies. On the morrow he would walk the perimeter of their retreat and bury wardstones at eight points and chant spells at sixty-four.

On the morrow he would find something to tattoo himself with, for he would need more protection runes on his body to keep him safe from the backlash of the black arts he must call upon to lay the traps necessary to ensure her safety from Lucan and any of Lucan's minions. On the morrow he would transmute the soil, in the fashion those most ancient of burial grounds had once been alchemized, brutally forcing the earth to change, calling it alive, making it answerable to him and only him.

If there were anything dead in the soil he'd chosen, things could get . . . unpleasant, but he would shield her. If he had to tattoo himself from head to toe, shave his hair, and dye-brand his scalp, the palms of his hands, the soles of his feet, and his tongue, he would shield her.

One day you'll have tattooed your entire body. Tears had shimmered in his mother's eyes when she'd spotted the fresh crimson tattoos on his neck, so fresh his own blood was still beading, mingled inseparably with the dye. *Then how will you safeguard your soul? Cian, you must stop. Send him away.*

He'd laughed at her. *I've scarce yielded a tenth of my body, Mother. And Lucan may be a learned man, but he hasn't enough power to be dangerous.*

You're wrong. And he's making you dangerous.

You know naught of what you speak.

But she'd known. From that first blustery winter's eve the dark Welsh stranger had appeared at their gates petitioning shelter, claiming to have lost his way in the storm, she'd known.

Turn him away, Cian, she'd begged. He comes to our step with darkness at his back in more ways than one. His mother had often been sought for her touch of prescience.

We'll but feed and shelter him for an eve, he'd said to please her. There'd been a time when pleasing those he loved had pleased him most. His sisters and mother especially. The eight of them had been a cluster of bright, feminine butterflies, swooping through his days, brilliantly coloring his existence, making him impatient for a mate of his own.

But then he'd discovered a fellow Druid in the man across his table that eve; a thing he'd not encountered before, and he'd been too curious to turn him away. His da had died before his birth, he'd had no brothers, and he'd never heard of another like himself in all of Albania.

One thing had led to another. Ego and arrogance had played no small part.

I can work this spell, can you?

Aye, can you work this one?

Aye. Ken you how to summon the elements?

Aye, ken you Voice? Have you heard of the Unseelie Hallows?

Nay, though I know of the Seelie Hallows: the spear, stone, sword, and cauldron.

Ah, so you've heard not of the Scrying Glass. . . .

It was what Lucan had called it then, the Dark Glass. The Welsh Druid had begun laying his trap that very eve, baiting it brilliantly. Can you imagine foretelling the winds of political change? Or knowing which contender for king with which to ally your clan? Or when a loved one might suffer a tragedy? 'Tis said the glass reveals the future in exacting detail, unlike anything our spells could ever hope to achieve.

Mayhap, Cian's blood had quickened at the thought, it could even show the coming of a Keltar's life mate.

The mere opening of a door that night, of not heeding a mother's words—how life drew its complex design from the simplest of choices, the smallest of moments!

All those he once loved had been dead for more than a thousand years.

Was Lucan out there, counting the hours to Samhain—or the Welshman's counterpart known as Hollantide, a night of ghostly visitation, divination games, and bonfire burning—as was he? Though he spoke aloud of days, Cian knew to the minute how long he had.

“A little over sixteen days, Trevayne,” he growled into the chill Highland night, “and you will answer for all you took from me.”

In three hundred eighty-four hours and forty-three minutes, to be precise, vengeance would finally be his.

His gaze dark, he glanced down at Jessica.

He'd never thought it would be such a double-edged sword.

Cian MacKeltar was a machine.

And Jessi didn't like it one bit.

After their intimacy at the airport and the warm camaraderie of their conversation last night, after sleeping drenched in the sinfully sexy man-scent of him, dressed in his clothing, sprawled on top of more of it, after having wickedly erotic dreams about him in which they'd had sex that would have made the author of the Kama Sutra sit up and start taking notes, after waking to find him standing naked over her, staring down at her from his mirror with that incredible rock-hard erection that had made her mouth dry and other parts of her oh-so-not-dry-at-all, she'd expected . . . well, at least a few hot, slippery kisses.

She'd not gotten a single, quick brush of his lips.

Not even a horny comment.

Just a *Are you awake?*

She'd blinked, unable to tear her gaze away from him. The man had, quite simply, the most amazing package she'd ever seen, and although most of the ones she'd seen had been in pictures, she still considered herself a fair judge. *Uh-huh, I'm awake, she'd managed breathlessly. Some parts of her more than others.*

Call me out.

She'd obeyed, wetting her lips.

Six and a half feet of muscle-ripped, naked Highlander had separated from the glass and reached toward her . . .

And past her, retrieving his clothing.

He'd dressed, for heaven's sake—covering up all that magnificent masculine nudity with swift efficiency. Then he scooped up the mirror and loaded it into the back of the SUV. He'd returned, scooped her up as well, and dumped her into the driver's seat.

As he'd deposited her behind the wheel, he'd pecked her freaking forehead.

When he'd lowered his head, like an idiot, she'd actually puckered, thinking he was finally going to kiss her. She'd smooched air, putting her in a positively foul mood—no matter that the sun was shining and it looked like it was going to be a glorious, unseasonably warm autumn day in the Highlands, and she was alive to see it.

Behaving with all the automated efficiency of a cool, detached Terminator, with steely insides and computer chips dictating his every move, Cian had referenced one of the pamphlets he'd swiped from the airport along with the stack of maps, and directed her to a store called Tiedemann's, an outdoorsman's store, specializing in camping equipment and survival gear.

For the past thirty minutes—ever since he'd so unceremoniously “parked” her at the front counter—he'd been oblivious to her, examining everything, asking the salesman he'd ensorcelled dozens of questions, selecting and sending to the counter insulated clothing, sleeping bags, a small gas stove, cooking implements, along with dozens of other things she had no idea what he planned to do with.

We will gather foodstuffs next, he'd informed her brusquely on one of his circuits through the store.

That had cheered her a bit. Her stomach was growling. She was starved. Food would be heaven. A cup of steaming cocoa or coffee with it would be even more heavenly. The skintight *Lucky* jeans he'd swiped for her days ago weren't nearly so snug on her waist as they'd been when he'd procured them, and they were in serious need of a washing. She'd slept on the plane in them, she'd slept on the ground in them. She'd been living in them twenty-four/seven for four days now. Same panties too. It had been four days since she'd last had a shower, and if she didn't get one soon, she might hurt somebody.

Pushing up on her tiptoes, she spied a collection of women's athletic gear and outdoor clothing just beyond the tent department. The least he could do, she decided peevishly, was Voice her some new clothes. And she wanted a bra, damn

it. Even a sports bra would do, and it looked like there were several racks of them. She doubted she'd find panties in this store, but she'd settle for a few bottles of water and some soap to wash them out by hand.

Shoving away from the counter where she'd been dutifully obeying his "wait right here" command, she wended her way through the camping gear to the women's department. As she approached the sports-bra racks, she saw the sign for the ladies' rest room and veered off toward it.

Just in case she didn't get a shower today—and there was no telling how any of her days were going to go in the care, custody, and control of one Cian MacKeltar—she was opting for yet another paper-towel bath to be on the safe, not-quite-so aromatic side.

"You will tell me how many of these gas refills I will require to use such a stove for sixteen days in the wilds. Assume it will be in constant use." Cian needed to keep Jessica warm and prepare meals for her, but dare not risk the smoke of a wood fire, inside the cave or out. Colorless, odorless, virtually smokeless gas was a welcome discovery.

The salesman performed a series of calculations and gave him a number, his hazel eyes glazed by the spell of compulsion, his gestures jerky, as if automated.

Cian had been using Voice since the moment he'd walked in the door. He wanted in and out fast. He had too much to accomplish today to permit the indulgence of the slightest of his personal desires, to waste even a moment of time. If he was lucky enough to have eight hours free of the glass today, he could accomplish all of his goals. He'd only had three hours and forty-two minutes free yesterday, so he felt it reasonable to expect a longer reprieve today—if aught about the Unseelie Hallow could be expected to function in accordance with even a loose definition of "reasonable."

Jessica was feeling slighted, he knew. He hated that, but it had to be for now.

She seemed not to ken that he had an inferno of need for her raging inside him and that if he fed it the least bit of oxygen, the blaze would burn out of control and consume him, along with the entire day, leaving it in a waste of ashes around them.

Then nightfall would come and she would not be safe enough. And it would be his fault. He refused to bear such blame or take such risks with her life. By eventide she would be as safe as he could possibly make her. Until that time, he dare not begin touching her, or he'd not be able to stop. He'd watched her sleep all night, studying the planes and angles of her face in the changing light, from moonlit night through a rosy dawn and finally in the brilliant blaze of full sunrise, committing them to memory. Were he a sculptor, he could now carve her face in stone, even were he blind.

It had been agony to stand watching her, caressing with his gaze what his hands could not. It had been a joy. He'd learned centuries ago to suck from life what pleasure his hellish circumstances would permit.

When she'd awakened, she'd rolled over and stared up at him with sleepy-sexy eyes. She had three cowlicks, unruly thatches of hair that curled wildly. Now he possessed an image of her that only a lover might know—how she looked in the morning with her face sleep-flushed, her lips sleep-swollen, and her curls askew in a short, dark tangle. She woke up looking soft and warm, more than a little bemused, and utterly sensual. Made a man want to scoop her into his arms and devour her.

He'd briefly envisioned himself stepping from the mirror, yanking her jeans down, taking her hard and fast, then throwing her in the SUV.

But he'd known better than to delude himself with the notion that he could be “hard and fast” with Jessica. Hard? Aye. Fast. Not a holy chance in hell. If he got started, he'd not be able to stop, and her life, and his vengeance, was of far more import than his lust.

Today was for the procuring of sheltering goods, foodstuffs, dyes and needles and wardstones.

Tomorrow was for the claiming of his woman. And the next day and the next and the next. Once she was safe, he would devote every moment of his freedom from the glass to the thorough claiming of Jessica St. James.

“Shall I package these items up for you as well, sir?” the salesman asked.

Cian nodded, glancing over to where Jessica was standing. Last he'd looked, her arms had been crossed over her bountiful breasts, shoving them together and even higher, her lower lip had been sulkily and delectably pushed out, and she'd

been tapping one foot impatiently.

She wasn't there.

Where the bloody hell was she? He'd told her not to move. In English. And there was naught wrong with her hearing of which he was aware.

"Sir, did you wish the tent, as well?"

"Nay," Cian growled, eyeing a man who now stood, with his back to him, at the same counter where moments ago his woman had been.

Was that why Jessica had moved away? Had the man behaved toward her in some unseemly fashion? He'd kill the son of a bitch.

Cian assessed the interloper. The man was tall and powerfully built, wearing black trousers, black boots, and a black leather jacket. His long black hair was braided and folded under, wrapped and bound by a leather thong.

It was a manner in which Highlanders had once worn their hair, before even Cian's time. When they hadn't been liming it for battle to make themselves look more terrifying to the effeminately tidy Romans.

The man thought much of himself; 'twas obvious in the way he stood, the way he held himself. He reeked of arrogance. Cian didn't like him. Didn't like him at all. If the bastard had breathed so much as a single improper word to Jessica, he was dead.

"Jessica!" he barked. "Where are you, lass? Answer me!"

There was no reply.

He scanned the store, seeking the top of her head, her glossy black curls. There was no sign of her. Where had she gone?

He couldn't deep-listen to her, he couldn't compel her, but he suspected a deep-scan of the store would detect her presence. Hers was a unique imprint, a space of serenity and silence in an otherwise clamorous world.

He stretched his senses, casting a wide net, probing.

Something probed back so unexpectedly and with such ferocity that he flinched.

He immediately slammed up mental walls, one after the next, sealing himself off. Sealing out whatever the frigging hell *that* had been.

They were walls he'd never needed before.

No one had ever been able to probe him, not even Lucan with all his dark arts. It had been one of the things that had so infuriated his captor. Lucan still couldn't probe him, even after a thousand years of continually gaining more power and knowledge, though he'd never stopped trying, convinced that Cian knew spells he was hiding (he did and was), determined to get them one way or another (never going to happen).

During none of Lucan's attempted probings had Cian ever felt anything touch his mind. Trevayne hadn't been able to get even that far inside his skull.

But just now he'd felt a distinct *push against his mind. A distinct presence, though* he hesitated to say a single presence, for what had pushed at him possessed such complexity of character, such ancientness—older even than he—that he was unable to call it . . . well . . . exactly human. Or if it was, 'twas unlike any human he'd ever encountered.

Focusing his mind, he pushed back in the general direction from which it had come, trying to isolate it.

The man at the counter suddenly whipped around, gaze seeking restlessly, scanning the store.

Unusual golden eyes met Cian's and locked over racks of clothing and aisles of camping equipment. They were old eyes, aware eyes, eyes full of fierce intelligence.

They were the eyes of more than a mere Druid.

Cian shoved past the glassy-eyed salesman and stalked toward him, pushing racks of clothing out of his way. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who the hell are you?" the man flung back coolly. Softly. Arrogantly. The man moved toward him as swiftly and surely as Cian stalked the man; there wasn't an ounce of hesitation in him.

They met in an aisle, stopped half a dozen paces apart, and began circling each other, sizing each other up, like two dark, wild beasts, preparing to battle over

territory and mating rights.

Cian felt a rapid battery of hammer blows against the mental walls he'd erected. He permitted them, analyzing them, assessing his foe's strength.

Then he lashed back savagely. Just once.

It should have nigh split the prick's head.

If his opponent felt anything, he betrayed naught. Who was this man? "Where is my woman?" Cian snarled.

"I haven't seen your woman."

"If you've so much as touched a hair—"

"I have my own woman. Yours couldn't hold a candle to her."

"You have a death wish, Highlander."

"Nay." The man laughed. "Laid that to rest some time ago. On an icy ledge outside a Manhattan penthouse."

The man spoke nonsense. "Leave now and I won't kill you."

"Can't. I'm picking up hiking boots for my wife. She wants them today and 'tis her good graces that signify." His tone was lightly mocking, his smile a hundred-proof testosterone, spiked with dark irreverence.

Just the kind of smile Cian usually wore.

Och, aye, the man had a death wish.

There was no telling what Cian might have done next had a hand not closed over his forearm at that moment. He glanced down, his muscles instantly sliding smoother beneath his skin. Jessica was gazing up at him, lovely as ever, and unharmed.

"Woman, where have you been? I instructed you not to move from that counter."

"I stood there for half an hour," she replied crossly. "I went to the bathroom. I'm starving. Can we eat soon? I need coffee. And I want a shower. I took a little towel bath in the ladies' room, but I'm starting to feel like the wild animal that

woman at the airport accused me of being. Cian, why is that man staring at you like that? Do you know him?"

"‘Cian’?" the man demanded. "Your name is ‘Cian’?"

"Aye. What of it?"

The man stared at him a long moment. Then he laughed, a darkly amused sound, and shook his head as if he'd been pondering an absurdity. "Nay. 'Tis not possible," he murmured.

"What?" Cian snapped.

"Nothing. 'Tis nothing."

"What's with all these 'tis's? I didn't think Scottish people still talked like that," Jessica said, sounding puzzled, as she stood looking from one to the other. Suddenly, she sucked in a breath and cocked her head, staring back and forth again.

"You have my name. Give me yours," Cian said sharply.

"Dageus."

Cian looked down at Jessica. "Did this 'Dageus' say aught untoward to you, lass?"

She shook herself, as if jarred from thought. "How could he? This is the first I've seen of him. Do you know—"

"He was standing at the counter where I left you. You were gone when next I looked for you, and he was there."

She shrugged. "He must have gotten there after I'd already left. Cian, do you know that the two of you—"

Cian turned his attention back to Dageus. "You may go. But doona cross paths with me again, Highlander. 'Twill result in bloodshed. I doona care for you."

"I doona care for you, either," the man replied coolly. "But I'm not going anywhere until you release that salesman from your spell." He nodded past Cian, where the salesman waited. Where he would wait dazedly until Cian was

through with him.

“What ken you of spells?” Cian asked softly.

“More than you, I’d wager.”

“Not a chance. Stay out of my affairs.”

Jessica tried to interject, “Do either of you see the slightest re—”

“This village and all in it *is my affair. This is my world, stranger,*” Dageus retorted flatly.

” *’Twas my world long before it was yours, Highlander.*” Cian’s smile showed teeth, but no amusement.

Dageus went motionless but for that intense golden gaze, scrutinizing Cian thoroughly. Again Cian felt a push at his mind, more subtle than the last, yet much more forceful.

He shoved back, much more forcefully, as well, and this time the man’s unusual eyes flickered the tiniest bit.

“You doona mean what I think you mean by that,” said Dageus.

“Thinking implies sentience. I see little of that in you.”

“Look in a mirror, you’ll see even less. I’ll have your clan name, Highlander. What is it?”

Jessica piped up, “Speaking of looking in a mirror—”

“You’ll have my clan name and a battle. ’Tis Keltar,” Cian spat. “And yours?”

“Keltar,” Dageus spat back.

Cian stared at him, stunned.

Beside him, Jessica exclaimed, “I knew it, I knew it! That’s what I was trying to tell you, Cian. That the two of you look alike!”

“Get *back* here. You can’t be finding out that you’re my kinsman and then just go stomping off,” Dageus snapped at Cian’s broad retreating back.

“Watch me,” the towering barbarian flung over his shoulder. To the dazed salesman, he ordered, *“Pack it all up and load in the black SUV outside the door. Here are the keys. Lock it when you’ve finished. I’ll return for it anon. You will not speak of me or my woman to anyone.”* Banding an arm around the curvaceous, raven-haired woman’s shoulder, he steered her toward the door. *“We have much yet to do. Come, lass.”*

Dageus watched in disbelief as his ancestor, Cian MacKeltar—he was assuming it had to be the ninth-century Cian MacKeltar standing before him, for he’d ne’er heard of any other Keltar with that name—prepared to stalk off into the Highland morn without so much as a “fare-thee-well.” Without even having offered a “good-morrow, kinsman,” for that matter.

Without so much as a blethering word of clanly tidings.

Without a single explanation for this incomprehensible happenstance!

Furthermore, the man was indiscriminately using Voice, left and right, as if no rules applied to him whatsoever.

“I assume you’ll be *paying* for those goods,” Dageus said pointedly.

“You assume wrong.”

With that, the massive, wild-looking, tattooed Highlander guided the woman out the door, the salesman close on their heels.

Dageus glowered at the closing door. Christ, his ancestor was a savage! No wonder he’d gotten such a bad name. He looked uncontrollable, and he behaved like a barbarian. And by Danu, the power he sensed in him! Raw, rich, potent magic flowed through the man’s veins, not blood. If the Draghar had gotten their

claws into Cian rather than him . . .

He blew out a long, deep breath. 'Twas a damn good thing they hadn't. Though he couldn't fathom for a moment what might have prevented such a primitive, egotistical beast from breaking any rule he damn well pleased, including using the standing stones of Ban Drochaid for his own purposes.

What was he doing here? How had he gotten here? Where had he been for the past eleven centuries? Who was the woman with him?

He'd tried probing her while she'd stood at Cian's side, but had encountered some kind of sleek, smooth barrier. Was she a practitioner of magycks, too? His deep-listening talents had been growing by leaps and bounds over the past few months and he should have been able to pick up something. But he'd not gotten a flicker of a thought or emotion from her.

"Drustan's not going to like this," he muttered darkly. "Nay, he's not going to like it at all."

If a willingness to sacrifice everything for those he loved characterized Dageus, an abiding, unrelenting honor and a desire for a simple life uncomplicated by matters of Druidry and the Fae characterized his elder twin Drustan.

When he heard tell of this latest news, Drustan would undoubtedly say, "Why the blethering hell can't people stay where they belong, in their own century and out of mine?"

At which point his wife, Gwen, would remind him that it wasn't his century. That, in fact, it was he who'd begun it all by refusing to stay in the sixteenth century where he belonged. That if Drustan hadn't opted to slumber for five hundred years in a Rom enchantment so he could be reunited with Gwen in the twenty-first century, he never would have died in the fire that night so long ago. And if he'd not died in the fire, Dageus wouldn't have had to breach Keltar oaths and use the standing stones of the Ban Drochaid in violation of the sacred Compact between Man and the Tuatha Dé Danaan for personal gain, to go back in time and save Drustan's life. And if Dageus hadn't breached those oaths, he never would have been possessed by the souls of the thirteen evil Draghar, and forced to come forward himself to the twenty-first century, seeking a way to escape them.

And by the time his brainy physicist sister-in-law was done, Dageus had no

doubt she'd have found some way to postulate an obscure yet peculiarly synchronistic link between Dageus and Cian himself, and Drustan would heap the blame for this new visitor soundly at Dageus's feet.

Which was beyond far-fetched. There was no way he was taking the blame for the sudden appearance of their controversial ninth-century ancestor. He'd only been reading up on him, not trying to summon him.

He rubbed his jaw, frowning, wishing he could be entirely certain of that last fact.

The problem was, months ago in London, when Aoibheal, Queen of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, had personally appeared and wielded her immense power to strip away the souls of the thirteen evil Druids possessing him, freeing him from their dark control, she'd left their memories inside him, and he wasn't always certain of precisely what he was capable or not.

Initially, when the Queen had removed the thirteen souls of the Draghar from him, he'd believed himself entirely free. After suffering the din of thirteen rapacious, twisted, demanding entities inside him, the silence inside his skull had made him think them completely eradicated.

It had been some time before he'd realized that, although their consciousnesses were gone, every last memory of thirteen entire lives had been left in him, buried deep in his subconscious. He'd not wanted to believe that he still contained the terrible and forbidden lore the Draghar had so long ago amassed and, at first, when inexplicable knowledge had begun popping into his head, he'd denied it.

But he no longer could. Each day he discovered something new about himself. And on occasion, of late, he'd caught himself muttering bits of a spell beneath his breath that he'd never read or practiced, and he knew he'd somehow plucked it from the endless vaults of the Draghar within him, as if his subconscious was sorting through the banks of memories, filing them away according to some mysterious design.

Had he inadvertently used a spell?

He sighed.

If he had, this was his fault and he had to fix it.

If he hadn't, he still had to do *something*. He couldn't just let the oversized heathen stalk and stomp about their Highlands, using Voice on all and sundry, stealing goods from simple merchants honestly endeavoring to support their clansmen.

As if you've ne'er stolen anything, his conscience jabbed.

"Aye, but I always gave it back, eventually." And he had. He didn't think Cian MacKeltar had any intention of making eventual amends. He didn't look like an eventual-amends kind of man.

Sighing, he tucked the box containing Chloe's hiking boots beneath his arm and walked out the door after his ninth-century ancestor.

As he stepped into the sunny Highland morn, he looked left, then right. He spied neither hide nor hair of Cian MacKeltar.

Back at the castle, his four-and-a-half-months-pregnant wife awaited him. Pregnancy suited his lovely Chloe like a Highlander's wet dream; she was even more amorous of late, and she was quite the sensual vixen under the usual circumstances. He was of no mind to be separated from her for long. They'd planned a hike in the hills today and a leisurely picnic. It was warm enough to toop outside on a plaid beneath an endless blue sky, and he'd been greatly anticipating hours and hours of hedonistic love play. Her breasts were getting fuller, her hips widening, and her skin glowed with the inner radiance of impending motherhood. He was impatient to taste and touch and explore every last changing inch of her. He was of no mind to alter his plans to accommodate this recent unexpected development. *Highly* unexpected development, at that.

Drustan, remember our ancestor, Cian, who I was talking about recently? Well, uh, he's here.

He shook his head, muttering a string of curses.

He thought for a moment, absently watching the still-fully-compelled salesman—that was a serious wallop his ancestor's Voice packed—load the stolen goods into Cian's SUV, wondering how he might spend the most time with Chloe yet still manage this new wrinkle.

His eyes narrowed. Camping gear. His kinsman was purloining camping gear. Was he squatting somewhere on Keltar land? The gall! How long had he been

there?

He angled around the store employee and peered deeper into the SUV.

He blinked. Then he blinked again, very slowly, keeping his eyes closed for a moment before opening them.

It was still there.

It couldn't be! By Amergin—'twasn't possible!

Was it?

"Move," he growled at the salesman, employing Voice without even thinking about it.

The salesman stepped obediently aside.

Dageus reached into the SUV, pushed aside the blanket half-concealing the object, and another string of curses spilled from his lips.

"Impossible." But the proof of it was right there before his very eyes.

He'd never seen it before—verily, he never thought to see it—but the Draghar had.

The Dark Glass.

One of four unholy Unseelie Hallows.

At one point, the glass had actually been in their possession. They'd never been able to translate the spells necessary to use it, though not for lack of trying. Nor had they ever discerned its purpose.

It was a mystery to him as well, but he knew all he needed to know: His legendary ancestor of allegedly epic moral turpitude had one of the forbidden Unseelie Hallows in his possession.

And he was alive. And here in present day.

What the blethering hell was a Keltar Druid doing with the blackest of black magycks? They were Seelie guardians, not Unseelie!

The situation was far grimmer than he'd thought.

Rubbing his jaw, he pondered his options. They were few. He'd felt the power in his ancestor. He didn't delude himself for a moment that he'd be able to subdue him with magyck, unless he called on some of the Draghar's tricks, a thing he was highly reluctant to do.

Nor could he hope to use brute force without the possibility of innocent bystanders getting caught in the fray. Especially not if the formidable Druid simply lashed out with a spell to stop him.

Yet he needed to get the man to Castle Keltar.

Once there, mayhap together he and Drustan could bind him, question him, discover what was going on, and what to do about it.

His gaze slid back to the Dark Glass.

It exerted an unpleasant pull on him. Made him hunger to touch it. He'd heard tell that the Dark Hallows tended to have such a dangerous effect on men with power in their veins. He'd never experienced it before and hoped not to again. He felt both a constant, irresistible urge to reach for it, and also a bone-deep chill warning him away.

Eyeing it warily, the simplest solution occurred to him. One that would keep his need to touch it to a minimum.

His ancestor wasn't the only one who could use Voice. Dageus excelled at it too. Though he doubted he could outright contradict anything his ancestor had commanded, he was fair certain he could work around it.

Placing a hand on the salesman's shoulder, he instructed him quietly but forcefully, "You will give me the keys to that SUV. And when he returns for his vehicle you will tell him he will find it here." Plucking a pen and one of the young salesman's business cards from the pocket of the glassy-eyed man's crisp white shirt, he scribbled the address of Castle Keltar. "You will give him these keys, and direct him to that vehicle." Handing the salesman his own set of keys, he pointed down the street to the vehicle he'd recently purchased, a Hummer it was called, though in his estimation it leaned more toward a roar than a hum.

The salesman nodded blankly.

Dageus had no doubt his ancestor would come, sword swinging, to reclaim the Dark Glass. The man was fiercely aggressive by nature and, given that he was freely dabbling with black arts, he would be even more so.

Like as not, he'd be dangerously violent. He and Drustan would be wise to sequester Chloe, Gwen, and the young twins away.

Carefully, without making contact with the glass, he rearranged the blanket over the mirror.

Then, circling round to the driver's side of the SUV, Dageus tossed Chloe's boots onto the passenger's seat, climbed in, fired up the engine, and headed for home.

"But he's your descendant, for heaven's sake!" Jessi exclaimed. "How can you just walk away from him?"

The moment she'd seen the man "Dageus" scowling at Cian, she'd been struck by their sameness. The more she'd stared back and forth between them, the more convinced she'd become that they *had to be related somehow*.

Though Cian's descendant had been dressed in expensive, tailored black trousers, a black turtleneck, and a buttery-soft leather jacket, though he'd been well groomed and polished, his civilized appearance had failed to conceal an innate primitiveness that was just like Cian's.

She'd tried to point it out, but they were kindred even in their edgy tempers and excess testosterone. She'd not been able to spit the whole sentence out because they'd kept talking over her.

She'd continued her assessment, periodically attempting to interject her thoughts, to no avail.

Both had long dark hair, both had strong, chiseled Celtic features, both had arrogance shaping the very curve of their spine, conquest in the cant of their heads upon their shoulders, and an extra something running in their veins besides very blue, very pure blood.

Both had a base, seething sexuality. Both had powerful, highly developed physiques. And there was no denying it, Dageus was incredible looking.

But Cian was more *man than his descendant*. Rawer, more elemental. Dageus was leaner and prettier. Cian was larger, rough, tough, down-and-dirty—and hands-down sexier.

“Hey, wait for me!” she called, sprinting to catch up with him. While she’d been mulling over her thoughts, he’d stalked off again. He was disappearing from her view down the Sugar/Spice/Dry Goods aisle.

For a man from the ninth century, he was a quick study. Upon entering the grocery store, he’d eyed a cart consideringly, glanced around at other customers, snatched it, and begun pushing up and down aisles, examining items, selecting various cans and tins, tossing them in.

Instant Suisse Mocha—woohooo! Jessi took two tins of it from the shelf as she sped by, caught up with him, and dumped them in the cart. She’d not missed the gas stove and pots he’d heisted, and was greatly looking forward to a cup of chocolaty coffee once they got back to their “camp.”

“Aren’t you the least little bit curious about him?” she pressed.

He grunted. “Now is not the time for new beginnings, lass.” He cast the words over his shoulder at her with a scowl. “I’ll make none.”

Though she tried to hide it, a flicker of hurt flashed across her face. No new beginnings. She knew that.

And it shouldn’t bother her. It wasn’t as if they were making a new beginning or anything like that.

They were just stuck with each other for a while.

He wanted sex from her, nothing more. And this morning, he’d not even wanted sex. She was merely his means of remaining free from Lucan until he could have his vengeance. And he was merely her means of staying alive.

He couldn’t have made his feelings any plainer, really. Since the airport, all she’d gotten in the way of a kiss had been a stupid peck on the forehead that a chicken could have done better.

But like an idiot, she’d begun reading more into things than was actually there. They were forced to share close quarters, there was danger, and it was just making everything feel more intense than it was. On top of it, the man was

devastatingly sexy, powerful, smart, and magic, to boot. Who could blame a girl?

No new beginnings.

Damn it, it shouldn't bother her!

But it did. She tried to turn away, but his hand flashed out and caught her by the chin.

"Let me go," she snapped.

"Nay." His grip was implacable on her jaw.

There was little point in fighting for control of her face; he could have hoisted her into the air with that one big hand on her jaw, if he'd wished.

He searched her gaze a long silent moment. "You truly doona ken it, do you? Excepting with you, Jessica. You, lass, are the exception to everything," he said softly.

As if he'd not just knocked the breath out of her with those words and left her feeling weak-kneed, he released her chin, turned away, and began pushing the cart again.

*Jessi stood in the aisle, gaping after him. Then she broke into a sprint and caught him again. Closing a hand on his forearm, she tugged him to a stop. "You mean, you're not just stuck with me? You like me?" She wanted to kick herself the moment she blurted the stupid question. *Puh-thetic*, Jessi, she winced inwardly. *That was worse than the "I carried a watermelon" line from Dirty Dancing.**

His gaze was dark with some unfathomable emotion as he stared down at her. She stared, trying to determine what it was. It was an emotion she'd seen several times before, and at the oddest moments.

It was regret, she realized abruptly.

A subtle yet bottomless sorrow in those beautiful, darkly lashed eyes.

But what was he regretting, and why at this moment, as opposed to any other? It made no sense to her!

Suddenly he smiled, and the sadness was vanquished by whisky heat. “Aye, Jessica, I like you. And I’m not just stuck with you. You fit me here, woman.” He thumped his chest with his fist.

Then he shook her hand from his forearm and pushed off with the cart again. Jessi watched him move down the aisle, all sleek animal muscle and dark grace.

Wow. He wasn’t a man of many words, but when he used them, he certainly used the right ones. You fit me here. You are the exception to everything.

Crimeny.

It was how she’d always thought a relationship should be. People should fit each other: some days like sexy, strappy high-heeled shoes, other days like comfortable loafers—but always a good fit. And if you cared about someone, they should be the exception to everything; the number-one priority, the one who came before all others.

He was halfway down the aisle from her now, plucking a can from the shelf—her primal hunter/gatherer procuring food by modern means, she thought, with a soft snort of amusement. As she watched, he examined the can intently, read the ingredients, then returned it to the shelf and chose another, repeating his thorough study of it.

The contrast between his rough, tough-guy appearance and the domestic act he was performing did funny things to her head.

She had a sudden, breathtaking vision of a dark-haired little boy sitting in the seat of the cart, laughing up at Cian, grabbing at his swinging braids with chubby little fists, while his daddy inspected the ingredients on a jar of baby food. Her mind’s-eye picture of sexy, strong man with beautiful, helpless child made something soft and warm blossom behind her chest.

Just then, two women sashayed around the corner, toting baskets on their arms. They were about her age, model-slim and very pretty.

When they saw Cian, their eyes widened and they did double takes.

Her soft and warm feeling popped with the abruptness of a balloon bursting.

As they made their way down the aisle toward her—the nerve of them!—they turned around three more times to check out his butt.

His butt. Like it was public property or something.

Her hands fisted. A thundery little storm began to brew.

Unfortunately the women ruined the beginnings of a perfectly good brood by smiling at her and whispering in a sisterly, conspiratorial manner as they passed, “Heads-up, sweetie, *major eye-candy ahead. Check it out.*”

As they moved into the next aisle, Jessi blew out a gusty sigh. They’d just had to be nice.

Crossing her arms, she glared at Cian’s butt. Did it have to be so perfect? Couldn’t he have been a little shorter? Maybe he should cut his hair. No, she amended hastily, she loved his hair. It was sexy and silky, and she really wanted to see it without all those braids in once. Not to mention, feel it sweeping her bare skin.

Something in her tummy did a flip-flop. It wasn’t a comfortable feeling. It was a scary feeling. The dratted green-eyed monster had gotten her again. She felt downright possessive of him. Like he was *hers or something. What was happening to her?*

Cian turned just then and glanced back at her. His eyes narrowed. His hot gaze swept her from head to toe. He wet his lower lip, caught the tip of his tongue between his teeth, and flashed her a wicked smile.

His expression could not have more clearly said, The moment I get through doing what must be done, I’m going to be all over you, woman.

She brightened. “Okay,” she said, nodding agreeably. It was looking like it might just turn out to be a banner day in Jessi St. James’s world, after all.

He tossed his dark head back and laughed, his gilded-scotch gaze glittering with lust and unconcealed masculine triumph.

He was still laughing when he disappeared.

Banner day, her ass.

No bones about it—she *hated that mirror*.

It took Jessi nearly an hour to find her way back to the SUV.

Or rather, back to where the SUV had been in her other life—the one in which her possibilities for survival hadn't looked quite so grim.

When they'd stormed from Tiedemann's earlier, Cian had swiftly rearranged the mirror to his satisfaction, so their new "purchases" might not slip and slide in transit and damage it, then he'd turned and loped down the streets of Inverness at such a furious pace that it had been all she could do to keep up with him. She'd hardly glanced left or right, and hadn't paid any attention to where they were going, nor had she even bothered trying to gather the breath to talk to him, until they'd finally stopped at the grocery store. Ergo, she'd not realized how far he'd taken her, evading his descendant, until she'd attempted to retrace her steps through the unfamiliar Scottish streets.

Then—because she'd been watching for the SUV, not the store—she'd actually sprinted past Tiedemann's twice before realizing their stolen rental vehicle was no longer there.

"Shit, shit, *shit!*" she cried, staring at the empty space in front of the store.

She glanced farther down the street, thinking perhaps the SUV had inexplicably sprouted feet and moved itself while they'd been gone—stranger things had happened of late. Or maybe she'd just forgotten exactly where she'd parked it on the cobbled avenue.

Nope, not a single big, black, stolen SUV. On either side of the street.

How bad could one person's luck get?

“Don’t answer that,” she snapped hastily, in a general upward direction. “That was a purely rhetorical question, not a show-me-proof one.” She was beginning to suffer the paranoid suspicion that the Universe was using her as the butt of a series of perverse jokes.

The whole time she’d been winding down street after street, she’d been damming a rising tidal wave of panic, assuring herself that everything was going to be just fine, that this was only a minor setback, that Cian had just been sucked back into the mirror earlier than either of them had expected, and once she got back to the SUV, she’d drive them back to their camp and they’d try again tomorrow, with greater success.

Which wasn’t to say that she hadn’t been pissed when he’d vanished. She had. She’d left her purse inside her backpack in the SUV, figuring she wouldn’t need it because Cian could Voice her whatever she wanted, and her forty-two dollars and seventeen cents certainly wasn’t going to go very far.

Then, when he’d so abruptly disappeared, she’d stood in the grocery with a cart full of lovely snacks, her stomach growling hungrily, and realized that she was going to have to leave all that scrumptious food, because she didn’t have even a few dollars stuffed in a pocket somewhere, and couldn’t buy so much as a measly candy bar to get her through for a while.

She’d been so hungry that she’d actually considered shoplifting. It had not been a stab of conscience that had prevented her from embarking on a larcenous spree—hunger was a brutally compelling motive—but fear of being caught, because then what would happen to Cian?

With that worry foremost in her mind, stomach protesting her every retreating step, she’d left the grocery and dashed off to find him.

Only to find this—a great big, empty parking space.

Where was he?

She slumped down onto the curb and perched on the edge of it, propping her elbows on her knees, her chin on her fists.

She couldn’t believe that Lucan could have found them so quickly.

If he had, wouldn’t she be dead? Or at least under attack right now? She glanced

hastily, warily around.

No one was staring at her or moving toward her in a menacing manner.

Which left only two other possibilities that she could think of: 1) a thief had stolen their stolen auto, which—in addition to pushing the limits of the absurd—sucked because, for the life of her, she couldn't see a way she was going to be able to track down a thief by herself, nor could she report a stolen vehicle stolen to the police, because the police *were dread possibility number two*; 2) *the police had spotted it and impounded it and Jessi St. James was now wanted for Grand Theft Auto (thanks to half a dozen pieces of identification in her purse) in addition to being wanted for theft of the mirror and probably all the stuff Cian had Voiced from Tiedemann's, and possibly Murder One (though she was really hoping deletion of the hotel records had gotten her out of that), as well as Just Plain Dead by one evil sorcerer.*

She'd never been wanted for so many things in her life.

And not a single one of them any good.

Dageus grimaced as he tugged the Dark Glass from the back of the SUV.

Though he had no desire to make contact with it (mostly because he had *every* desire to make contact with it), he wanted it in the castle proper, the most heavily warded portion of the estate. 'Twould be safest there, and he hoped mayhap those wards would diminish the pull it was exerting on him.

There were no protection spells laid around the vast, detached garage behind the castle, where he'd parked the purloined SUV. 'Twas too new of a building, and one of which he'd not overseen the construction. He intended to properly ward it soon, for he hoped to make much use of it. He was developing quite a liking for modern modes of transportation. They were far easier on a man's privates than a horse betwixt the thighs.

He was already sorry he'd left his Hummer down in Inverness. The muscle-packed *H1 Alpha* was the first vehicle he'd purchased since he'd been living in the twenty-first century, and 'twas a truly magnificent machine. A man could go virtually anywhere in the rugged Highlands in it. He'd gotten attached to it in the manner a lad did his first fine stallion. He hoped his barbaric ancestor was a

responsible driver.

“Arrogant Neanderthal,” Dageus muttered, standing the mirror up on end, at arm’s length, and taking a good look at it.

He inhaled a sharp, fascinated breath.

The legendary Dark Glass. In *his hands*.

Astonishing. He traced his fingers lightly over the cool silvery surface, then across the runes chiseled deep into the golden frame.

Not even the thirteen within him, who’d lived side by side with the Tuatha Dé many millennia ago, knew the language with which the frame was adorned.

It was said that the Seelie and Unseelie Hallows had been spoken into existence by the sheer magic of the Tuatha Dé tongue. The sacred relics had been spelled into being by words and song—and not in the tongue of Adam Black and his contemporaries—but in a far more ancient language that had been spoken eons past, long before the Tuatha Dé had come to this world. A language allegedly forgotten by all but the most ancient among them.

A chill was inching up his arms.

’Twas not an entirely unpleasant sensation.

In fact, ’twas strangely invigorating. Made him feel positively powerful. Not good. Not good at all.

Scowling, he turned, hurrying with it from the garage. The moment he stepped from the cool, windowless interior into the brilliant sunshine, he felt better, stronger.

Still, he wasn’t about to dally with the infernal thing in his hands.

Tucking the glass beneath his arm with the silvery side facing him so as not to blind anyone who might be looking his way, he walked around the castle and began heading across the front lawn.

“YOU BLOODY FUCKING IDIOT!” the mirror roared. “HAVE YOU ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’VE GONE AND DONE?”

Dageus was so startled by the bizarreness of the Dark Glass roaring at him that he did what most men would have done.

He dropped it.

Drustan lay flat on his back, his arm around his wife, breathing hard. 'Twas high noon and he was still in bed. Which wasn't to say he was a lazy man and hadn't yet been up that morn. He'd been up. And up. With his lovely wee Gwendolyn in his arms, he was nigh always up.

"God, that was amazing," his wife said fervently just then, curling closer into his side, one of her small, dainty hands caressing his lightly stubbled jaw.

He had a sudden urge to leap from the bed and proudly pound his chest with his fists. He settled instead for turning his head, kissing her palm, and saying with studied casualness, "Mean you the third or the fourth time, lass?"

She laughed. "*All times. As it has been since our first time, Drustan. You're always amazing.*"

"I love you, woman," he said fiercely, recalling their first time. 'Twas a night he'd never forget, not a detail of it: not the crimson kitten thong he'd believed a fancy hair ribbon when he'd glimpsed it in her pack—until she'd slipped her shorts down that night, showing him what it was really meant for. Not the intense way they'd made love right there in God's great wide-open, beneath a star-drenched sky, in the center of the standing stones of Ban Drochaid. Nor the way she'd later stood, so true of heart and trusting, as he'd cast her back in time.

Gwen Cassidy was his soul mate, they were bound in the ancient Druid way, forever and beyond, and every moment of life with her was priceless. She'd enriched his world in so many ways, not the least of which had been the recent gift of two beautiful dark-haired twin daughters who, at scarce five months of age, were already showing rather startling signs of intelligence. And why shouldn't they, he thought proudly, betwixt his Druid gifts and his wee Gwendolyn's brilliant physicist's mind?

On the topic of their babes . . .

"Think you we should—"

“Yes,” she agreed instantly. “I’m missing them too.”

He smiled. Though they’d been wed for little over a year, they knew each other’s mind and heart as well as their own. And although they had the best of care for their daughters with two live-in nannies, they were reluctant to be parted from their bairn for long. Unless they were tooping, of course. *Then they tended to forget the whole world.*

When she peeled herself from his side and moved toward the shower, he rose to join her.

But as he passed the tall windows of their bedchamber, a flicker of motion beyond them caught his eye. He paused, glancing out.

His brother was standing out on the lawn, gazing down at the grass.

Drustan’s smile deepened.

They’d been through a time of it when Dageus had turned dark. It had been hellish there for a while, but his brother was once again free and, by Amergin, life was rich and sweet and full! His da Silvan and their next-mother Nell would be delighted to know how well their sons fared in the modern day.

He had all he’d ever wanted: a cherished wife, a burgeoning clan, his brother wed and blissfully happy, and the prospect of a long, simple, good life in his beloved Highlands.

Och, there’d been a bit of a ruckus last month when one of the Tuatha Dé, Adam Black, had appeared, but things had swiftly settled back into an easy cadence, and he was looking forward to a long time of—

He blinked.

Dageus was conversing with a mirror.

Standing in the middle of the front lawn, holding it gingerly by the sides, and speaking heatedly to it.

Drustan rubbed his jaw, perplexed.

Why was his brother talking to a mirror? Was it some strange twenty-first-century way of mulling things over, of—literally—consulting with oneself?

Come to think of it, he mused, where had the mirror come from?

It hadn't been there moments ago. It was taller than his brother. Wider too. 'Twas hardly as if Dageus might have been concealing it in a pocket or beneath a fold in his kilt, not that he was wearing a kilt. They'd both adopted modern modes of dress and were slowly adapting to new ways.

Drustan leaned against the windowpane. Nay, not only was the looking glass quite awkwardly large, it flashed brilliant gold and silver in the sun. How could he have overlooked it earlier?

Mayhap, he decided, it had been lying on the ground, and Dageus had picked it up. And mayhap he was merely saying something along the lines of "Oh, my, how peculiar, where did you come from?"

Drustan's silvery eyes narrowed. But why would a mirror be lying about on the front lawn? They had gardeners. Surely one of them would have noticed such a thing and relegated it elsewhere. How had it gotten there? Perchance dropped from the sky?

He was getting a bad feeling about this.

"Are you coming, love?" Gwendolyn called.

He heard the sound of the shower spray change as she stepped beneath it. In his mind's eye, he could see her; water sluicing down her beautiful body, glistening wetly on her smooth, pale skin. He adored modern plumbing, couldn't get enough of his wife when she was soapy and slippery and feeling frisky.

Below him, Dageus was now shaking a fist and shouting at the mirror.

Drustan closed his eyes.

After a long moment, he opened them again and cast a longing glance in the direction of the running shower and his gloriously naked, wet wife.

Then a glare out the window.

He exhaled gustily. "I doona think so, love. I'm sorry," he called, "but 'twould seem Dageus is, for some unfathomable reason, having a heated discourse with a looking glass out on our front lawn."

“Dageus is doing what with a heated horse and a looking glass?” Gwen exclaimed from the shower.

“Discourse, sweet, discourse,” he called back.

“Huh?”

He sighed again. Then, “He’s talking to a mirror,” he called much more loudly. “I must go discover why.”

“Talking to a—oh! On the front lawn? Dageus? Really? Wait for me, Drustan! I’ll just be a minute,” she yelled back. “This sounds positively fascinating!”

Drustan shook his head. Fascinating, his woman said. She had the oddest perspective on things sometimes.

He smiled faintly then, suddenly far less chafed by the prospect of yet another ruckus in his life. After all, wasn’t that what life was about?

Ruckuses.

And if a man was truly blessed, he got a woman like his Gwendolyn with whom to share them.

“Pick me up, you ham-fisted oaf. The bloody frigging sun is bloody frigging blinding me,” the mirror snarled.

Dageus blinked down at the glass. ’Twas lying faceup on the lawn and stuffed nigh to bursting with an enraged Cian MacKeltar.

One of his ancestor’s hands was braced at the side of the mirror on the inside of the glass, the blade of his other hand to his forehead as if shielding his narrowed eyes from a glare.

For a long moment, Dageus simply couldn’t find any words with which to form a sentence. Then, “What the hell are you doing in there, kinsman?” he managed blankly.

There was a man inside a mirror. His relative. His ancient relative. He thought he’d seen it all, but he’d ne’er seen aught like this. Dozens of questions collided

in his mind.

“Sun. Blinding. Pick me up,” his ancestor snapped.

Dageus glanced up. The sun was directly above him.

He glanced back down. Mystified, he bent and stood the glass up on end, facing him. He handled it gingerly, trying not to touch much of it. Because his grip was not firm, it slipped from his fingers and nearly went right back down again. He scarce managed to catch it in time.

“For Christ’s sake, be careful with the damn thing!” his ancestor hissed. “ ’Tis made of glass. Sort of. In an odd sense of the word. Are you always so clumsy?”

Dageus stiffened. “Are you always such a foul-tempered arse? You’ve the manners of a blethering Lowlander. ’Tis no wonder you’ve such a bad reputation.”

“I’ve a bad—” His ancestor broke off, raising his hands as if to ward off further talk on that topic. “Forget it. I doona wish to ken what they say about me.” He glanced around the lawn. “Where the hell have you taken me?”

“Castle Keltar.” Dageus thought a moment, then added, “A second Castle Keltar, not the one you likely knew.”

A muscle worked in his kinsman’s jaw. “And how far would this second Castle Keltar be from Inverness?”

Dageus shrugged. “Half an hour or so.”

“Let me guess, you interfering barbarian. For some reason, you took my vehicle?” the mirror snapped.

“I’m a barbarian? Look who’s talking,” Dageus said indignantly.

“You bloody fool, you will go back down there and get my woman. Now.”

“Your woman? The lass ’twas with you in the store?”

“Aye.”

Dageus shook his head slowly. This was leverage. “Nay. Not until you tell me what’s going on, and explain yourself to my brother. What are you doing in the

mirror? I ken full well what it is. 'Tis the Dark Glass, an Unseelie Hallow, and the Keltar have no business with Unseelie relics. How are you using it? Are you practicing black magycks? My brother will not permit such doings in his keep. Drustan suffers no—”

His kinsman pounded his fists on the inside of the mirror, actually rattling it in the ornate frame. *“Go get my woman! You left her unprotected, you son of a bitch!”*

“Nay. Answers first,” Dageus said flatly.

“Not a word until she’s here,” Cian said just as flatly.

They glared at each other, at an impasse.

A sudden thought occurred to Dageus. Why wasn’t his temperamental, formidably gifted ancestor bursting forth from the glass and going after his woman himself? What could stop a Druid as mighty as Cian MacKeltar. “You’re stuck in there, aren’t you?” he exclaimed.

“What the bloody hell do you think? You think I’d be sitting in here twiddling my thumbs if I could do something? Go. Get. My. Woman.”

“But you were out earlier. How? Why—”

“You said you had a woman of your own,” his ancestor cut him off roughly. “How would you feel if she’d been left by herself in the middle of a city she’d never been in before, and there were trained assassins hunting her? My woman is in danger, damn you! You must go after her, man! Then I’ll tell you aught you wish to ken!”

A fist closed around Dageus’s heart at the thought of Chloe in such a situation. He’d seen her in danger before and it had damn near killed him. A man’s woman took priority over everything else. Questions could wait. The care and well-being of loved ones could never be deferred.

Never.

“Och, blethering hell, I didn’t know. I’ll go get your woman,” he said instantly. Tucking the mirror beneath his arm again, he hastened with it toward the castle.

“We’re going the wrong way!” the mirror shouted for the third time, as Dageus walked up the front steps and entered the castle.

“Nay, we’re not. I told you, I’m not taking you with me,” Dageus said flatly. “I will find your woman far more quickly if I doona have to be worrying about breaking you. I know what she looks like. I’ll find her, I vow it.”

’Twas truth that he didn’t wish to have to be concerned about damaging the mirror, but even more truth that he didn’t want to be in such close proximity to the Dark Hallow any longer. He suspected its strange pull had been working subtly on him the entire time he’d been driving home, peaking when he’d opened up the back of the SUV. He had no desire to spend what could be hours driving around, with the Hallow no more than a few feet away from him, in an enclosed space.

Tossing his head back, he bellowed, “Drustan!” with enough volume to rattle the eaves.

“Christ, Dageus, I’m right above you,” his brother replied, wincing. “There’s no need to go shouting the walls down.”

Dageus glanced up. His twin was standing at the balustrade that overlooked the great hall entrance, gazing down. “How was I to know that? Why are you standing there, Drustan?”

“Why are you talking to a mirror, Dageus?” Drustan said very, very quietly.

“I said ‘wait for me!’ “ Gwen cried at that moment, from somewhere down the corridor behind his brother.

Dageus shook his head. He had no time for explanations. The woman’s name, Cian had told him as they’d crossed the lawn, interspersed with his increasingly pissed-off demands to accompany him back down to Inverness, was Jessica St. James. She was an innocent in this—whatever “this” was—and she was in mortal danger.

He had to go. Now.

Propping the mirror against the wall near the door, he waved a hand at it and clipped, “Drustan: Cian MacKeltar. Cian: Drustan MacKeltar.”

“Dageus,” Drustan’s voice was soft as velvet, never a good sign, “why are you

introducing me to a mirror?”

“Look in the mirror, Drustan,” Dageus said impatiently, angling it a bit so he could see into it from above.

His brother’s jaw dropped.

Dageus smiled faintly. ’Twas nice to know he wasn’t the only one utterly discombobulated by the sight of a man inside a mirror. “I doona believe he can get out, Drustan, so he shouldn’t present a danger. However, you may wish to store him away from women and children until we know more.”

Drustan was still gaping, speechless.

The mirror growled, “Away from women and children? I’ve never been a threat to women and children, you lummox!”

“Verily, kinsman, we know naught about you,” Dageus retorted. “So why doona you try explaining things to my brother while I’m gone? Then mayhap somebody can explain them to me when I return.”

“Doona leave me here,” Cian hissed. “Take me with you.”

“I said I’ll find your woman, and I will.”

Above him, Drustan finally found his tongue. “Cian MacKeltar!” he exploded. “Mean you our ancestor Cian? The one from the ninth century?”

“Aye. And ’tis the Dark Glass, Drustan, one of the Unseelie Hallows,” he imparted tersely. His brother didn’t contain the vast knowledge of the Draghar within him, and Dageus doubted his ability to recognize it for what it was. “You may wish to keep your contact with it to a minimum. It works on the magic in our blood, enticing us.” He added a final aside: “I inadvertently left his woman unprotected. I must go get her. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Without further ado, Dageus turned and raced from the castle.

Jessi polished off her third hamburger, balled up the paper wrapping, and tucked it back in the bag.

“Better, lass?” Dageus asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said with a contented sigh. She’d never tasted such scrumptious, decadently juicy, perfect hamburgers in her entire life, though she suspected not having eaten in over twenty-four hours might be biasing her the teeniest bit. She gulped thirstily at her super-sized water; all the walking and worrying she’d done today had left her feeling dehydrated.

Leaning back against the seat of the SUV, she stretched out her legs. She was feeling tremendously better, buoyed by food, heartened by the discovery that Cian was somewhere safe, and quite frankly delighted that she wasn’t going to have to sleep beneath a bridge somewhere tonight using newspaper for blankets.

“Och, Christ, have I told you how sorry I am?”

“Only about a hundred times now,” she told Dageus dryly.

“ ’Tis but that I feel like such an ass, lass. I’d ne’er have taken the mirror if I’d thought ’twould leave you in any danger. Please believe that.”

“I do,” she assured him. “And it’s all right. Everything turned out okay. I’m here, Cian’s safe, and no one’s the worse for wear.” Although, she appended silently, she wasn’t going to feel a hundred percent okay until she saw Cian with her own eyes.

She glanced over at Dageus. It was full dark outside and the only light in the SUV came from the faint green glow of the dashboard’s electronics. He looked a lot like Cian in the low light; same strong features, long hair, powerful body. His quiet respect and responsibility toward women reminded her of Cian as well.

He’d been searching for her for hours, he’d told her, when they’d finally crossed

each other's path.

At a complete loss for what to do upon discovering the SUV missing, Jessi had commenced methodically searching every street, alley, and parking lot in Inverness, hoping against hope that she would somehow miraculously stumble upon it somewhere. It was a terrible plan, and she knew it, but she'd needed to take some action, *any* kind of action, to avoid having a meltdown.

The truth was, she'd not really expected to find the stolen vehicle again and, near dusk, when she'd spotted it at the end of the next block, idling by the curb, she'd been flabbergasted.

She sprinted eagerly, stupidly toward it the moment she'd glimpsed it. Belatedly, she'd checked herself and stopped warily, a dozen feet away.

Then Cian's descendant had stepped from it.

Hey, she'd blurted to his back, without thinking, *I know you! What are you doing with our SUV?*

The sudden fear that he might be a bad guy, too, had spiked through her then. But he'd turned and looked at her and his expression had been one of such pure relief that her fears vanished. *Thank God! There you are, lass. I've been looking all over for you!* he'd exclaimed.

Exhausted and starving, she'd nearly burst into tears.

She wasn't all alone and lost in Scotland with nowhere to turn, after all. Someone had been looking for her. Someone was glad to see her.

He'd told her, with the first of his many apologies, that he'd only taken the SUV because he'd seen the Dark Glass in it and been worried about what was being done with the Hallow. He'd been home already when he'd discovered Cian in the mirror, and been sent back by his furious ancestor to find her.

His furious ancestor, he'd said. He *knew*. And he wasn't the least bit weirded out by it!

Although Dageus had referred to Cian as "kinsman" in Tiedemann's, Jessi had decided that Dageus must have believed they were somehow distantly related in *current* day, that Cian was an illegitimate, distant cousin or something.

Certainly not that he was an ancient ancestor who'd been trapped in a mirror for eleven centuries. Really, what sort of person would readily accept that kind of nonsense? She certainly hadn't. She'd resisted until the last possible moment, only when she'd been forced to concede that her life was at stake.

But Dageus wasn't having any problem with it at all. Which pointed to only one logical conclusion.

"So, I guess none of you MacKeltars are normal, huh?" she probed.

He smiled faintly. "Nay, not exactly. I'm fair certain my wife will tell the tale better than I, but I and my twin, whom you'll meet shortly, are from the sixteenth century."

Jessi blinked. "Did you turn too? Is that how you got here?"

"Turn?"

"Into a dark sorcerer," she clarified. "Is that how you and your brother ended up here? Did you guys get stuck in things, too?"

Dageus made a choking sound. "By the sweet saints, is Cian a dark sorcerer, then, lass?"

"Don't you know anything about your ancestor?"

"His name was stricken from all Keltar annals eleven centuries ago. Verily, until just recently when the underground chamber was reopened, we believed him a legend, naught more. Is he a dark sorcerer, then?"

"He seems to think so. I'm not so sure."

"How did he end up in the mirror?"

"I don't know. He won't talk about it. Yet," she added firmly. Jessi'd had several epiphanies today while hunting for Cian, terrified that she might never see him again. The day had stretched on and on, and, alone with her thoughts and fears, certain facts had attained a stark clarity in her mind.

One was that she wanted to know everything there was to know about Cian MacKeltar. All of it, good and bad. She knew from the parts of his stories that had penetrated her stupor the night he'd killed the assassin masquerading as

Room Service, that he'd had a wonderful childhood in the Highlands. She knew also that, somewhere, something had gone terribly wrong. She wanted to know what it was; how he'd ended up in the mirror; how he could think he was a dark sorcerer when every time she looked at him, she saw light.

Oh, not pure sweet blinding light. Not even close. Cian MacKeltar wasn't that kind of man and would never be. Truth was, she didn't much like that kind of man anyway. Cian wasn't one of the bad guys—but he could be if necessary, at the drop of a hat and utterly without remorse.

But “bad guy” wasn't his primary persona. He was what psychologists and anthropologists would call an Alpha male, men who were defined by an inherent lawlessness. They obeyed only their own code, and if it happened to briefly converge with the laws of society-at-large, it was mere coincidence. One could never be completely certain what an Alpha male would do if he, or those he considered his, were threatened. One could only hope to stay within an Alpha male's protected circle—or as far out of his line of sight as possible.

Jessi knew where she wanted to be, smack at the center of Cian MacKeltar's protected circle. And not just because someone was after her, but because he wanted her there under any circumstances. That was the second epiphany she'd had today while frantically hunting for him.

“But you doona think he's dark, eh, lass?” Dageus jarred her from her thoughts. “You think he's a good man? Do you believe in him, lass? With your heart?”

She looked at him curiously. There was a note of urgency in his voice, as if the question was very important to him. “You don't even know me. Would it matter to you if I did?”

“Och, aye, Jessica. A woman's thoughts and feelings always matter to Keltar men.”

Hmmm. With each passing moment, she was liking Keltar men more and more.

“So? Do you?” he pressed.

“Yes,” Jessi said without reservation. “I do.”

When they got to the castle—Crimeny, she was in a *castle*!—Dageus guided her

through at such breakneck speed that her surroundings whizzed by and she hardly managed to see a thing.

She got a brief, astonished glimpse of a magnificent great hall with a fabulous fairy-tale staircase that descended from both sides of the upper stories, a rapid look at a stunning suit of armor in an alcove, and a much-too-hasty glance into a darkly paneled room adorned by ancient weaponry, with claymores, battle-axes, spears, and broadswords gracing the walls in intriguing geometric patterns. She'd positively itched to grab a chair, pull them down, and begin testing for authenticity. Though she suspected everything she was seeing was the genuine article.

Why wouldn't the contents of the castle be from centuries long past? The occupants were.

After steering her into a library, he deposited her there, then hurried off to "gather the rest of the clan and bring your man in. My brother and our wives will join you anon."

Now, waiting by herself, she proceeded to take a thorough, fascinated peek around.

The library was a beautiful, spacious, yet cozily inviting retreat, reminding Jessi much of the understated, impeccable elegance of Professor Keene's office.

Tall bay windows, draped in velvet, overlooked a manicured garden. Cherry bookcases were recessed into paneled walls. An enormous, dusky-rose stone and marble fireplace climbed one wall, the elaborate mantel climbing all the way to the ceiling. There were many richly brocaded, overstuffed chairs and ottomans arranged in various conversation areas, beside lavishly carved, leather-detailed occasional tables. The trey ceiling had ornate embossing and three tiers of elegant moldings. A stately bar was custom-crafted into a section of the bookshelves.

From what she'd seen on her rushed way through, the entire castle was a historian's dream, liberally scattered with antiques and relics, and the library was no different.

Centuries-old tapestries adorned the walls. The room was illumed by exquisite—and she was willing to bet real—Tiffany table lamps that cast a stained-glass amber and rosy glow about the room. The majority of the books on the shelves

were leather-bound and some looked quite old, resting with care on their flats, not their spines. A massive desk with a top inlaid of three gleaming burl panels divided by intricate Celtic knot-work occupied one corner, with a tall leather chair behind it. Library tables perched beneath spotlighted portraits of Keltar ancestors. Muted antique rugs warmed the room, accented by an occasional plush lambskin. A pretty ladder with sides of carved scrollwork slid along the walls of bookcases on padded wheels, atop the gleaming perimeter of wood floor.

She was just moving toward the ladder, to push it to an especially interesting-looking pile of manuscripts, when two pretty blondes burst into the library, followed by a man she initially mistook for Dageus.

“Welcome to Castle Keltar,” one of the blondes said breathlessly. “I’m Gwen and this is my husband, Drustan. This is Dageus’s wife, Chloe.”

“Hi,” Jessi said tentatively. “I’m Jessi St. James.”

“We know. Dageus told us,” Gwen said. “We can’t *wait* to hear your story. You can start now if you’d like,” she said brightly. “We’ve been waiting all day.”

Dageus walked in then, toting the mirror, holding it by the sides.

She’d half expected to hear furious bellows heralding his approach, and was somewhat surprised that the glass was silent.

He crossed the room and propped the mirror up against the bookcase, near the conversation area where she and the MacKeltars had gathered.

She peered at it. It was flat silver and there was no sign of Cian.

Jessi hurried over to the looking glass, reaching instinctively for it.

At the same moment, Cian’s hand rose within the silver as he stepped forward, making himself visible.

She heard feminine gasps behind her.

“So *there* he is,” one of the women exclaimed. “Not only did he refuse to answer any of our questions, he wouldn’t even *show* himself until you got here.”

The world receded around her and narrowed down to nothing but Cian. The

expression in his whisky gaze was stark.

“Och, Jessica,” he said, his butter-rum voice rough and low. He was silent a moment, drinking her in. “I’m not much of a man when I can’t even protect my woman. The bloody glass reclaimed me and I couldn’t get to you!”

My woman, he’d called her. She could see in his eyes and hear in his voice that the day of worrying had been hell on him too. She was sorry it had been; and she was glad. Glad it hadn’t been just her going crazy. Glad because it meant his feelings matched hers. “Yes, you *are*,” she told him fiercely. “You’re more man than any I’ve ever known. You’re more man than any other man could ever *hope* to be. You’ve saved my life twice! I’d be dead if it weren’t for you. Besides, you couldn’t possibly anticipate that your stupid descendant would *steal* you. Who could have seen that coming?”

Behind her, someone cleared his throat. She thought it might be Drustan, but he and Dageus were so alike that it was hard to be sure. Then she knew it was Dageus because, with a note of wry amusement in his voice, he said, “His stupid descendant wishes to know how you release him, lass.”

She pressed her other palm to the glass. Cian aligned his to hers. They stared hungrily at each other. After being afraid she’d lost him, she needed to touch him, ached to feel his body against hers, to taste his kisses. To feel his hands claiming her. *His woman, he’d called her, and she was pretty sure those weren’t words a ninth-century Highlander ever used lightly.*

“Is it okay if I tell him?” she asked Cian.

He shrugged. “Aye, I suppose so.”

She said over her shoulder, “There’s a summoning spell—*Lialth bree che bree, Cian MacKeltar, drachme se-sidh*—but it won’t work right now because—”

Even as she was about to explain that not enough time had elapsed since that morning when he’d last been out, the runes carved into the ornate frame began to blaze with a brilliant inner light and the parameters of the library felt suddenly skewed. Her jaw dropped.

Cian looked just as startled as she. Then his dark eyes blazed with exultation. “Mayhap because the last two times were so short, lass,” he exclaimed hoarsely. “Who cares the why of it?”

He pushed forward, reaching for her. One moment Jessi had her palms pressed to cool glass, the next it was full black and icy, and then the warm strength of his hands was closing around hers. He separated from the mirror, peeling away from the silvery rippling pool, walking her backwards, his gilt-whisky eyes glittering with passion and lust not-to-be-denied.

She shivered with anticipation.

Distantly, she heard Chloe and Gwen's startled exclamations, then heard nothing more when he ducked his head and slanted his mouth hungrily over hers. She melted into him, against the hot steel of his big body, threading her fingers into his braids, parting her lips, yielding utterly to him.

Abruptly, he dragged his mouth from hers. "Is this castle warded, kinsmen?" he grated over her shoulder.

One of the twins answered, "Well, aye—"

"Think you two puny Druids can hold this keep for a single night?" Cian cut him off.

"We two *puny* Druids," one of the twins spat, "could hold—"

"—this keep for a blethering eternity if we so wished," the other twin finished.

"Good. Go do it. Get the bloody hell out of here."

He slanted his mouth over Jessica's again.

Behind the passionately entwined couple, Drustan's eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. "Of all the arrogant—"

"Remember the day I trapped you in the garderobe and you finally remembered who I was, my love?" Gwen interrupted softly.

Drustan swallowed the rest of his words. Did he ever! He'd been nigh crazed with desire for her. Naught in the world could have stopped him from making love to her then and there. In fact, they'd doffed every scrap of clothing the two of them had worn, right there in the great hall, and to this day, he was uncertain if they'd had an audience. And to this day, he still didn't care.

Which was exactly how it appeared Cian and Jessica were feeling. In fact, there

went the man's shirt soaring over her head, to land on a lamp. The delicate stained-glass shade wobbled a precarious moment, then settled.

Drustan had no desire to see any more of his ancestor than he was currently seeing.

Except, he thought, scrutinizing the man's sculpted upper torso, *blethering hell, what are those tattoos?* Had another Keltar fallen from grace? If so, how far? He had wee bairn sleeping abovestairs, a wife and clan to protect, and he'd like to know what to expect. Who and what was this man and what was he doing here? And why did he have an Unseelie Hallow? He wanted explanations, by God, he *deserved* explanations. This was his castle, his world. He was the senior Keltar male, after all! Or . . . er, *och*, he *had* been the senior Keltar male until a few moments ago!

His scowl deepened. If his ninth-century ancestor thought he was going to usurp lairdly duties of the clan based on birth order, he was sadly mistaken.

He regarded him irritably, but despite his displeasure, his expression softened.

Cian and Jessica were kissing like the world might come crashing to an end at any moment.

And Drustan knew exactly how that felt. Each time he kissed his wife, each time he held their precious twins in his arms, it seemed the world couldn't possibly grant him time enough to love, even if it spun out to eternity.

He didn't need to try deep-listening to his ancestor to know the woman Cian was kissing was his mate.

Some things required no explanations.

The matching of a Keltar with his woman was one of them.

He heard the metal groan of a zipper. His or hers, he didn't know. Nor was he about to stand about and find out.

His questions would have to wait.

Pivoting, he ushered the lot of them from the library.

The moment Jessi heard the *snick* of the library door as it closed behind the MacKeltars, her body tensed and her pulse began to race nervously.

They were alone, Cian was free of the mirror, and she was touching him. She couldn't have asked for more, yet all of a sudden she felt weirded out about it.

With the instincts of a natural-born predator, Cian sensed the change in her body. He broke the kiss and drew back, gazing down at her. His sexy mouth was kiss-slicked and half-opened on the hard, fast breathing of lust, and his dark, hooded eyes glinted dangerously.

She moved back a few steps and stood staring up at him, panting as raggedly as he.

He reached out and lightly brushed her jaw with the back of his knuckles. When he spoke his voice was rough, hot, and low. "Is aught amiss, woman?"

She shook her head.

"I doona think I would handle it well if you played games with me, Jessica."

Swallowing audibly, she shook her head again.

"What, then?" he demanded.

She shrugged helplessly. She had no words. She couldn't explain. She wanted him right now more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life and, at the same time, she felt as if she'd suddenly found herself perched on the edge of a precipice, and had no idea what she was doing there. Was goaded by some bone-deep, desperate imperative to back away, to seek safer ground.

She didn't understand it. She was no coward. She was certainly no cock-tease. She wanted him. And not just for sex, but much more, which was the way she'd always believed it should and would be when she finally slept with a man. Here

he was, the man she desired, and he desired her too. Twice before she'd been ready to plunge right in and have sex with him. So what in the world was wrong with her now?

Cian scrutinized Jessica. Now would have been a fine time to be able to deep-read his woman, but he couldn't, so he turned his focus to her body instead of her mind.

Her jade eyes were stormy. Defiance shaped her stance. Her chin was uptilted, her delicate nostrils flared, her feet planted shoulder-width apart, like a little warrior.

Yet counterpoint to the blatantly telegraphed denial was—not merely invitation—but sheer feminine taunt. *Look at me*. Her spine was arched, her ass out-thrust, her heavy breasts proudly raised and displayed to their finest.

Her nipples were hard, poking through her snug white sweater.

And she'd just wet her lips again. Tossed her head in a challenging come-hither.

Don't touch me/Come and get me, every ounce of her was saying.

Cian closed the distance between them, ducked his head, and inhaled sharply. She stepped back again, but not before he'd gotten what he'd been after. He smiled, pleased by her dichotomy. He fathomed it well.

She smelled of an exquisite combination of fear, defiance, and desperate sexual hunger. 'Twas a scent he'd waited all his life to smell, a desire that had intensified painfully in him over these past days.

He'd wager, even as learned as she was, she didn't fully understand what she was feeling.

But he did. Perfectly.

It was all he'd dared hope for.

Jessica St. James had accepted him as her man, and for more than just this night. If she hadn't, she'd not have smelled of this unique combination. A woman seeking only a night's pleasure smelled of desire, little more. Certainly not fear and defiance, unless the man was doing something he shouldn't be, things the woman didn't want, and such a bastard should be put down. Women were

precious, to be cared for, not despoiled and abused.

But a woman recognizing her mate smelled of those things because such recognition heralded significant life change. In his century, the woman would have recognized that babes were coming, that she was leaving her girlhood and her clan behind, bonding to a new clan, cleaving to her husband and his people, embarking upon the impassioned tear- and joy-filled route of her mother before her.

A strong, independent, modern woman like Jessica St. James would instinctively resist such change, in proportions equal to her desire for it. She was a woman accustomed to being in control. With him, her control would be threatened.

He intended to threaten the hell out of it.

It was time he made her his. Time he made it clear that, although she might one day lie with another man, none would ever be *him*, *none would ever be good enough, none would ever make her feel the way he had this night. The way he would make her feel the next and the next and the next. He would sear his mark into her in ways she would never be able to forget. When one day she took another man to her bed, he would be on that mattress between them, a great, big, dark Highlander using up too much space, a barrier around her heart, forever alive in her memory.*

When he reached for her and pulled her back into his arms, he got more of her womanly dichotomy, but 'twas a dichotomy a man could work with, verily, a wise man would savor.

For as she came into his arms, she turned her back to him as if to deny him, yet at the same time backed right up to him, thrusting her sweet ass against his hard, hot cock. She wanted what he wanted: claiming first, loving later.

With a soft moan, she quested back with her bottom. The sound ripped into his groin, stringing his testicles tight. Dropping his head forward, he cupped her jaw, slanted her face around, and kissed her, deep and long, pumping his hard shaft against her lush behind.

He walked her forward, one hand at her waist keeping her pressed back to him, the other on her chin. He nipped at her kiss-glossed, lush lips, tasting her with slow, firm sucking pulls. He trailed more kisses over the delicate shape of her ear, down the edge of her jaw, over her neck. He continued walking her forward

until he walked them into something, not caring what piece of furniture it might be, so long as he found one.

Something to lay her down on would be good.

Ah, his descendant's desk—better still! Groping blindly, he shoved everything off it, heedless of the crashing, tinkling sounds of objects hitting the floor. Filling his hands with her lush breasts, he bent her forward, over the ornately carved, cool wood. She gasped, bracing her palms on the high-glossed desk.

He needed to be inside her. Nothing less than final, incontrovertible proof that she'd chosen him for her man would sate him now. Reluctantly relinquishing those heavy breasts that jiggled so perfectly, so womanly, with his every thrust, he slipped his hands down to her jeans. "I'm going to take you now, lass."

She jerked and arched her delicate spine, glancing over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were as wild as he knew his must be. "Yes," she said raggedly. "Please, Cian."

Please, Cian. He could listen to her say those words for the rest of eternity! Die a happy man, hearing her beg carnal pleasure from him. Die trying to give it to her, any way she wanted it.

"Are you wet for me, Jessica?" He knew she was. He could smell her woman's heat. But he wanted her to say it. Wanted to hear her talk about how he made her feel, how she felt about him.

"I *always* am around you." She sounded both marveling and miffed by the admission.

"Does that fash you, lass?"

"I've never felt, *ooh!*"—she gasped when he ground himself in a slow circle against her as he slowly undid the top button of her jeans—"this way before. I'm always turned on, and I can't seem to turn it off."

"It makes you feel out of control."

"Yes." She sounded fully miffed and not at all marveling now.

"You're supposed to be out of control for your man, lass. That's the way of passion. Think you passion is tidy? Neat?" He laughed. "Hardly. Not in my

bed.”

“What about the man?” she demanded. “Is he out of control for the woman?”

He grunted. A man could never completely lose control with his woman. At least not a man his size with a woman her size. Still, that didn’t mean he wasn’t out of control in his thoughts, in his gut. He was. Just looking at her made something in him that had always been wild to begin with, even wilder. “I’m always hard for you. I got hard the moment I saw you that first night. And, nay, lass, I can’t turn it off, either. But unlike you, I doona try to. I give into the heat. The need. The pain of the hunger. I savor wanting you, lusting for you, thinking about all the things I’m going to do to you.” He cupped a cheek of her jean-clad ass in each big palm, squeezed. His voice deepened to a sexy, hot purr: “I relish every last thought of taking you, of knowing you as completely and intimately as a man can know his woman. And I’m going to know every inch of you, lass. You want that, doona you, Jessica?”

“Yes,” she moaned.

“By the time I’m done with you, you’ll never be able to forget me. I’m going to burn myself into you so deep that you’ll bear the imprint of me beneath your skin for the rest of your life. Tell me you want me to, Jessica.” *Forgive me now for sins you doona even know I’m committing.*

“I want you t—oooh!” Her reply turned into a gasp when he thrust strongly against her.

He smiled with dark satisfaction. There was too much clothing between them. He needed to feel her slick and wet and tight, closing on him. Popping the remaining two buttons of her jeans, he shoved them down over her hips, baring her luscious little ass.

He sucked in a ragged breath, pushed her jeans to her ankles, but no farther, leaving her feet caught in them.

“You want to feel me inside you, lass?”

“Yes!”

“Slow and easy, or hard and fast? What would you have of me, Jessica?”

“Yes,” she wailed.

He laughed, a deep rumble of masculine triumph. A man dreamed of an unconditional “aye” from such an exquisite woman.

Lifting her hips, he repositioned her the way he wanted her. Nudging her feet back, he pushed her thighs apart until her knees bent to accommodate the angle, and stepped between them. Catching her jeans behind his boots, he kicked back, drawing them taut at her ankles, pinning her helplessly in her jeans, trapping her between his big body and the desk.

With her legs spread on either side of his thighs, he could keep them wide apart, her ass up-thrust, her soft folds exposed. In her prone stance, she could only take what he was about to give her. Not control it a bit. And if she tried to, all he’d have to do was kick back with a boot to still her.

Later he might give her all the control she wanted—though it would chafe him to the very core of his manhood, he’d consider letting her tie him nine ways to Imbolc if it pleased her—but right now any control he yielded her would weaken his, and his was as threadbare as the original pair of trows he’d been wearing the day he’d been imprisoned.

They’d fallen to rags half an aeon ago.

Jessi gasped when Cian stepped between her legs. She was so wet and ready for him! She couldn’t have moved her lower body if her life had depended on it, and she’d never been so painfully turned-on in her life as she was, helplessly spread for him like this.

He was behind her, her great, big, intensely sexual Highlander, and for a moment, she was reminded of the first time she’d seen him in the professor’s office, a shadowy intimidating presence in the mirror. And the thought occurred to her then that from that very moment, *this* very moment had been somehow preordained. Inescapable. That no matter which way she’d tried to go, it all would have ended up with her bent over a desk, breathlessly waiting for him to take her, to make her feel this wildly alive. There was a word on the tip of her tongue, something about events lining up in improbable ways. It wasn’t “synergy,” it wasn’t “coincidence” or “providence.” It might begin with an S, she thought. . . .

Then his big hands were rucking up her sweater, lifting her shoulders, tugging it over her head, freeing her aching breasts, and she thought about words no more. He cupped and kneaded, pinching and tugging her nipples to hard peaks before

stretching her hands above her head and pressing her firmly forward, flush to the desk, pillowing her breasts on it. Her nipples burned against the cool wood.

“Hold on to the edge of the desk, lass. Hands over your head like that.”

Swallowing, she gripped the carved edge of the desk.

One of his big hands closed on the nape of her neck. He turned her head to the side, pressing her cheek to the desk. A band of intricate Celtic knot-work divided two inlaid panels a few inches from her eyes. His big palm cupped the back of her head, keeping her still.

He slid his other hand between her legs and began parting her slick, exposed feminine folds.

She mewled helplessly. His zipper was already open. She’d yanked it free herself the second time he’d kissed her, while the other MacKeltars had still been in the library. She waited, lower lip caught between her teeth, for that first burning hot thrust of him.

Her whole body convulsed when the hard, thick head of his cock prodded her with insistent, delicious friction. He rubbed back and forth in her creamy heat, spreading the erotic slickness on him, on her. She twitched, desperate for him to push inside her, to soothe her, to release the unbearable tension in her body. He kicked back against the jeans taut at her ankles, stilling her.

“Please,” she gasped, trying to press back with her bottom, but she was unable to move even that much, the way he was holding her.

“Is this what you want?” he purred, his voice dark and rich, guiding himself between her sleek, swollen labia. Torturing her, stopping, poised at her entrance.

“Yes, *please*, Cian,” she wailed.

He began to feed himself into her slowly. She clenched the edge of the desk, gripping it so hard she felt like she was gouging nail scores into the glossy wood. He was so big, so thick. Her body had never yielded for this before and her inner female muscles tensed, trying to resist the steely male intrusion, even as she was aching for it. She squirmed what little she could, desperate to accommodate him.

He hissed long and low between clenched teeth. “Bloody hell, Jessica, you’re tight!”

“Probably because I’ve never . . . *ah!* . . . done this before!” she managed to force out, swamped by raw, intense sensation.

He went still behind her, barely in her. “Tell me you jest,” he said tightly after a long moment.

“Cian,” she cried, “don’t you dare stop now!”

“You are maiden? At your age?”

“I’m not *that* old. Move, damn it!”

“By my time’s standards, ’tis unfathomable!”

“By mine, too,” she gritted. “So now that I’ve decided not to be a virgin anymore, is it too much to ask for a little h—*elp!*” He pushed forward, piercing her hymen in a smooth, even thrust.

He gave her but a moment of stillness to recover, to adjust. The brief stinging sensation passed quickly and once more she was burning with feverish need.

Gripping her hips with his big hands, he began to impale her slowly, inch by mind-blowingly delicious inch. Relentlessly he usurped every nook and cranny her body ceded.

“Can you take more, Jessica? I’m not yet half in, lass. Am I hurting you?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean, yes and then no! Yes. More!”

He pushed yet more of himself in, stretching her, filling her, long and thick and hard.

She whimpered, clinging to the desk. It was unlike anything she’d imagined. She was certain there was no way she could take more of him inside her, but then her sleek inner heat would not only yield but thrill to him, both stretch and embrace, ease yet tighten hungrily around him. She was a velvet glove, custom-crafted for him. She’d been made for this man, she marveled, designed to sheathe him.

With one final, strong push, he thrust himself in to the hilt, the silky hair on his muscular thighs rasping against her silky bottom, and she cried out from the fullness of it. It was pain yet pleasure, it was too much, yet just exactly right. She was full of him, part of him, her body melting around him, adhering to him,

making them one. It was raw, it was fierce, it was incredible.

Then he began moving! Easing out, inch by incredible inch, leaving her hot and empty and aching.

Filling her back up just as slowly. Driving himself into her sleek heat.

Cian stared down at Jessica's pretty, silken ass as he worked himself in and out of her. Bloody hell, she was tight and hot and slick.

And virgin. He couldn't believe it. He was stunned that this incredibly passionate, beautiful, smart woman had never lain with another man. He'd never have guessed it. He'd thought her an experienced woman.

But not Jessica. She'd come to him untouched by any other. And though it wouldn't have mattered to him how she'd come, the fact that he was her first man, that he was the only one she'd *chosen* to accept, with the countless men who had undoubtedly tried to get where he was right now, filled him with an intense possessiveness, gave him a primal, masculine thrill.

The need to spill his seed in her had been riding him merciless as a Harpy since he'd pumped that first inch inside. He'd damn near exploded when he'd pushed through her maidenhead.

He stared down at her, bent over the desk, her delicate spine arched, the paler skin of her full breasts crushed to the desk, the generous plump mounds spilling out the sides, her small, dainty hands stretched above her head, fingers clutching the wood, her lush, sweet ass thrusting up to meet him, he watched himself pump into her. It was the most exquisite, sensual sight he'd ever seen.

He thought of his prison, to maintain control. He needed her to find her pleasure before he took his.

Gritting his teeth, he began mentally reciting the parameters of his hell. *Fifty-two thousand, nine hundred and eighty-seven stones.*

He wanted to give her so much pleasure that each time she looked at him, her body would remember what he could make her feel, and begin hungering for it. *Twenty-seven thousand two hundred and sixteen of them paler gray than the rest.*

He wanted to be her every sexual fantasy, as well as her man and her rock and her best friend. *Thirty-six thousand and four more rectangular than square.*

He slipped one hand in front of her, between her woman's mound and the desk, found her silken nub with his thumb and began playing it, rolling his pad over it, lightly, gently. *Nine hundred and eighteen stones have a vaguely hexagonal shape.* Then faster and more firmly. Then backing off again, lightly, gently, rubbing slow circles all around her clitoris, without actually grazing it.

“Oooh—Cian, that feels so good!”

He eased out of her slowly, thrust back in powerfully. Teasing her nub with alternately slow and gentle, then frantic friction, he slid two fingers over her slick, swollen mound, pushing between her lips, to feel where they joined, where the thick, rock-hard shaft of his cock was entering her. Where they became one. *Ninety-two stones have a vein of bronze running through the face. Three are cracked.*

Jessi writhed deliriously beneath Cian's sensual assault. One of his big hands was on her behind, firmly cupping a cheek, holding her still; the other was between her legs from the front, delicately, expertly working her clit, backing off until she was ready to scream, resuming again just when and how she needed it. She gripped the edge of the desk, quivering uncontrollably, as if being shocked by little sizzling erotic pulses.

Her orgasm ripped through her so suddenly and intensely that she cried out, a long, wild half-sob, half-scream. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and lay whimpering helplessly beneath him, shuddering with wave after wave of pleasure, taking all he was giving her, convulsing as he milked every last ripple of climax from her with his pounding, with his clever, relentless hand.

Her hot, sleek warmth quivering around him was too much! He couldn't hold it and stopped trying. Dropping forward, Cian covered her, gathering her back against his hard, muscled chest, and growled close to her ear, “You're mine, Jessica. Do you ken that? Mine.” He gave her two more powerful pumps of his cock and exploded in hot intense spurts inside her.

The inexplicable feeling of the rightness of him coming inside her, coupled with the pad of his thumb deliciously abrading her orgasm-sensitive clit and his possessive words, kicked Jessi right back into another orgasm. You're mine, too, Highlander was her last fierce thought, before they slipped down to the floor and dozed for a time beneath the desk in a sated, entwined stupor.

Cian sat on the floor near the fire, leaning his shoulders back against an ottoman, watching Jessica, entranced.

She was sitting cross-legged on a plush lambskin rug before the briskly crackling fire he'd just topped with sheaves of fragrant heather. Her jade eyes were sparkling, her short dark curls were softly tousled, and she had a velvet crimson throw tucked about her hips. She was talking animatedly, gesturing with her hands. And he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, he couldn't hear a bloody damned word.

She was naked from the waist up and her pretty, high, round breasts quivered and bobbed with each gesture, her rosy nipples gently swayed.

The warm glow of the firelight highlighted chestnut strands in her raven curls he'd not seen before, and kissed her creamy skin with a brush of gold.

It was all he could do to keep his hands off her, but he knew that if he pushed her too far this night, he'd not be able to have her on the morrow, and the next and the next. He had to pace himself with her, though it was killing him. His palms itched with the need to caress her lush, sweet curves, to take her beneath him again and again.

He stretched out his legs and leaned back on his hands, keeping them well behind him, forcing himself to be contented for a time just savoring the exquisite vision before him.

Jessica St. James: half-nude, all woman, and glowing from his bedplay.

He'd known the moment he'd first glimpsed her that it would come to this. That he would have her this way. As certain as his vengeance, she'd been his destiny.

After they'd slipped beneath the desk and drowsed for a time, he'd stirred, roused her, and scooped her into his arms. He'd carried her here, before the fire, laid her back on the plush creamy sheepskin, and made love to her. Slowly, gently, showing her that he was more than a great big territorial brute, that there was tenderness in him too. He wanted her to know all the facets of him: ninth-century war-laird and sorcerer, and simple man and Druid.

They'd drowsed again, then stirred again, and begun talking lazily of small things, lover's things: favorite colors and seasons, foods, and places and people.

But suddenly her gaze turned serious and she leaned forward. “How did it happen, Cian? How did you end up in the mirror?”

He leaned forward, too, unable to resist the full, soft breasts swaying toward him with her movement. He ran the pad of his finger beneath the lush curve of one beautiful, silken-skinned mound. “Och, woman,” he said softly, “you show me Heaven and ask me to revisit Hell? Not now, sweet Jessica. Now is for us. No grim thoughts. Only *us*.”

Cupping her breasts with his big hands, he ducked his head and slicked his tongue across one of those rosy nipples before catching it in his mouth with a husky, sensual purr. It hardened instantly against his tongue. He teased it lightly with his teeth, scraping it across the edge, then pressed it with his tongue against his palate, suckling deeply.

“Us,” she repeated breathlessly, clutching his dark head to her.

It was the most incredible night of Jessi’s life. It surpassed all she’d ever imagined that special night would be. It was searing. It was intimate. It was filled with sounds of passion that she was sure must have rung out from the stone walls, echoing sharply down the winding corridors of the vast, ancient castle. It was hushed and conspiratorial. It was raw. It was tender. It was perfection.

He’d taken her wildly, roughly on the desk, calling out to and laying claim upon the kindred wildness within her.

He’d made sweet, painstakingly slow love to her before the fire, cupping her face with his hands, staring into her eyes, caressing her so tenderly and seemingly reverently that she’d had to turn her face away from him to hide an inexplicable burn of tears. As he’d moved, sure and deep inside her, she’d felt as if he’d been making love to her soul.

He’d rolled over onto his back and raised her high above him, muscles bunching and rippling in those powerful, tattooed arms, then lowered her, inch by delicious inch, onto his hard, straining erection.

He was a phenomenal lover! He never went completely soft. Even after he came he was still hard. Once she’d rued his being Terminator-tough. But she wasn’t

about to waste a single breath complaining about him being an unstoppable sexual machine. (Though, come morning, she might waste a few breaths complaining if, as she suspected was going to be the case, she could hardly walk!)

After their third intense, erotic bout, stretched on a velvety chaise, with her riding both of them to a brain-melting, panting orgasm, he bundled them up in soft woolen throws collected from various chairs, and they slipped out through the French doors of the library and onto a stone terrace beneath the pearly radiance of a half-full moon.

He stood behind her and pulled her back into his embrace, resting his chin on the top of her head. She was cocooned by the spicy, erotic man-scent of him. Mixed with that scent was a subtler one: the smell they made together. It was intoxicating to her—the scent of their lovemaking—sweat and kisses and come.

He held her like that in silence for a long time, staring out at the night, gazing at the mountains beyond.

And she watched the sky, brilliantly splashed with sparkling stars, marveling.

College was a lifetime away.

She could no longer remember the Jessi who'd so tightly scheduled her entire life. The one who had a coffee cup stuffed way in the back of her cupboard that said: *Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans.*

She'd finally stopped making other plans.

And this was Life.

Here and now.

She realized then, much to her astonishment, standing there beneath that wide-open Highland sky in the arms of her sexy Highlander, that she was no longer in such a hurry to finish her PhD. In fact, hanging out in Scotland and doing a bit of casual, unstructured digging around these mountains could probably keep her happy for a long time. Especially if Cian MacKeltar was around to carry her tools and keep her company.

And although she knew she would probably never be able to comprehend her mother's lack of matrimonial staying power no matter how hard she tried, she

suddenly completely understood Lilly's desire for babies, and her unceasing, constant love for all her children: halves, steps, and wholes alike.

It was a complex emotion Jessi'd never felt before, because she'd never met a man whose children she'd wanted and whose last name she'd tried on for size:

Jessica MacKeltar.

For the first time in her life she wondered what kind of babies she would make with a man. What kind of children they could bring into the world together, she and this big, fierce, handful of a man. They would be something—that was for sure!

Jessi knew what was happening to her.

It terrified her even as it elated her. She suspected she was glowing every bit as luminescent as the moon above her.

Falling in love could do that to a woman.

“We’re coming in now,” the deep Scottish burr of one of the MacKeltar twins warned through the double doors of the library.

Jessi flashed Cian a cheeky grin. “Guess they got tired of waiting.”

“Aye, ’twould seem so, lass,” he replied, running a finger down the inside of the silvery glass. She mated the pad of her index to his.

She would be so glad when he was finally free of that damned glass!

It had reclaimed him directly from the shower. In the early hours of the morning, they’d finally ventured from the library and wandered down corridor after corridor, peeking into various chambers, looking for a bathroom.

They’d found one befitting castle and king, with a fabulous shower sporting multiple pulsing heads and a reclining bench. They’d made love yet again, soaping each other slippery, sliding and bumping and grinding beneath the steamy spray. Then the powerful, muscled dark Highlander had dropped to his knees, pressed her back against the wall with his hands on her thighs, and, at a time when she would have sworn herself incapable of more pleasure, had kissed and licked and nibbled her to another shuddering orgasm.

She’d learned over the long, sizzling night that the forbidding man Cian MacKeltar showed the world wasn’t the same one that took a woman to bed.

That man—the lover—dropped barriers, opened himself, gave in small ways she’d never have suspected. That man watched every flicker of her eyelash, learning what pleased her, what made her smile. That man teased with the playfulness of a man who’d had seven sisters he’d obviously adored.

That man had disappeared while she’d been kissing him, leaving her alone in the shower, bereft and kissing air.

She’d fisted her hands with a fierce, hurt scowl.

It had been a bad moment, eased only by the thought that in fifteen more days he would be free of the stupid glass forever.

She'd decided, as she'd finished rinsing off and stepped from the stall, that in retrospect, they were lucky Dageus had taken their SUV. Things couldn't have worked out better.

They were now in the highly secure castle of Cian's descendants, and she was pretty sure that—although his descendants seemed as bristly and testosterone-laden as he was—they would nonetheless do all in their power to keep him safe from Lucan until after the tithe was due. (And when it was all over, she was getting a sledgehammer and smashing that damned mirror into a thousand tiny silvery pieces. Who cared that it was a relic? It had held Cian captive for eleven centuries and she wanted it dead.)

Not once during her harrowing day yesterday had she imagined she might be starting this day—a gloriously sunny Highland morning, at that—having made hot, passionate love all night with the man of her dreams, in pretty much the safest place they could hope to be, with two other Druids present to stand additional guard between her and Cian, and any threat that might come to pass.

“Are you decent?” a woman's voice called, pushing the door cautiously ajar.

“Nay, but we're clothed,” Cian purred.

Jessi laughed. He certainly wasn't decent. The man was shamelessly *indecent*. He was an animal in bed. And out. A great, big, hungry, uninhibited animal.

And she *adored* it.

Gwen hurried into the library first, trailed by Chloe. Their sexy husbands brought up the rear. Jessi studied the twins with interest this morning. She'd been too tense and worried about Cian last night to look at them much. Now she examined them at a sexually-induced-endorphin-drugged leisure.

They were magnificent men, with identical, chiseled Celtic features, golden skin, strong noses, and chiseled jaws dusted by the same dark shadow-beards.

Though they were twins, there were significant differences.

Dageus's long black hair was free this morning and spilled in a sleek fall of midnight silk to his waist. Drustan's stopped about six inches past his shoulders.

Dageus's eyes were tiger-gold, Drustan's sparkled like shards of silver and ice. Though both had powerful physiques and stood well over six feet and several inches, Dageus was leaner, ripped with muscle; Drustan was slightly taller, broader, and packed with it. Both were extraordinary men, but Jessi was willing to bet all Keltar males were. All those dominant-male, exceptional qualities that shaped Cian so uniquely were still there, present in his descendants, centuries later. There was simply something extra in their blue blood, programmed into their regal genes.

Gwen smiled warmly at her. "We thought you might like some clean clothes. Chloe and I rummaged through our closets and brought you a few things. We had a few other items taken to the Silver Chamber for you."

Surprised and delighted, Jessi pushed to her feet. Clean clothes! The morning just kept getting better and better. As she hurried across the patterned rugs, Dageus and Drustan hastened past her, their fascinated gazes locked on the mirror.

"What make you of the runes on the frame, Dageus?" Drustan asked.

"I doona ken the language, do you?"

"Nay," Drustan replied.

Jessi accepted the small pile of clothing, forgetting about the men for a moment. Gwen and Chloe hadn't just brought "a few things," they'd brought her everything she needed. There was a pair of low-ride, button-fly Paper Denim & Cloth jeans that she could never have afforded herself, a delicate pink tank with a lacy scooped neckline, and a matching, soft woolen cardigan. They also brought panties, socks, boots, and—wonder of wonders—a bra! She wasn't going to sag prematurely after all. She fingered the plain white spandex appreciatively.

Gwen stepped closer and said in a low voice so the men wouldn't overhear, "I know it's not very pretty, but it's the only one I had that I thought might fit. I wore it when I was pregnant."

"Oh, it's perfect," Jessi said fervently. "It's a bra. I couldn't be happier. Thank you. Both of you." She smiled at them.

"If you're going to be staying with us awhile," said Chloe, "we can go

shopping. Or if you need to stick close to the castle, we can order some things off the Internet.”

Jessi blinked, feeling humbled by the two gracious women. Just like that, they’d accepted her. She’d burst into their home, unannounced and uninvited, they didn’t know the first thing about her, yet they’d made her welcome. They’d brought her pretty clothes. They cared that she had a pretty bra. “Thank you,” she said again, with heartfelt sincerity.

“There’s a half-bath just down the hall to the left, by the great hall, if you’d like to change there.”

Nodding, Jessi hurried off, looking forward to wearing clean clothes again.

When she returned to the library, the MacKeltars were seated near the fire.

They’d moved the Dark Glass from where it had been slanted against the bookcase, to the wall next to the mantel, facing them.

Cian stood, his powerful jean-clad legs widespread, his palms braced on something at the outer edges of the glass—she guessed a stone wall on each side—staring out into the library.

He was wearing the black *Ironman* T-shirt again, and the muscles in his tattooed arms rippled beneath the short sleeves with his slightest movement. She’d had those arms around her in just about every way imaginable last night. She was greatly looking forward to more of the same tonight, or whenever he could be freed next. An ottoman was propped at the base of the mirror to keep it from sliding on the polished wood floor.

On a nearby coffee table was an appetizing spread of iced scones, assorted fruits, cheeses and pastries, and three gently steaming carafes.

“The white carafe has coffee, the silver is cocoa, and the ivory one has hot water for tea,” Gwen told her.

Jessi hurried to the table, gratefully poured herself a cup of coffee, and reached for a lightly iced scone, before taking a seat and joining them.

Commandeering a few scones into his mirror, along with the entire pot of cocoa

—much to the amazement and delight of both Chloe and Gwen, who made him send it back out and resummon it again—Cian brusquely explained their situation to his descendants, amid swallows of creamy chocolate and bites of pastries.

Jessi had heard it before, and he didn't add any detail to it now. No one could ever accuse the man of TMI—too much information. He advised them that he'd been bound to the Dark Glass by a sorcerer named Lucan Trevayne eleven centuries past, thereby securing immortality for himself.

“So, that's what its purpose is!” Dageus had exclaimed.

Cian had nodded and continued, telling them he'd been kept hung on one of Lucan's walls or another for the past 1,133 years. That several months ago something had happened in London that had taken down all the wards protecting Lucan's property while he'd been out of the country; a thief had stolen Trevayne's prized collection; and that the mirror had been transferred from merchant to merchant for several months before ultimately ending up in Jessica's hands.

He advised briskly of the tithe sealing the Unseelie indenture, that it was due in a mere fifteen days, that he must remain free of Lucan for another fortnight, until past midnight on Samhain, and that he was formally petitioning their aid to help him do so, and to keep “his woman” safe.

She loved hearing those words! *His woman.*

“What then?” Drustan asked the same question Jessi had broached when she'd heard Cian's story. “Once the tithe is missed and the indenture broken? What plan you then?”

Cian dropped his head down and forward, resting the top of his head against the inside of the glass. When he raised it again, his whisky eyes glittered with feral fury. “Then I will have my vengeance on the bastard who trapped me.”

The room was silent a moment.

Then Dageus said, “You said the gold tithe must be paid every one hundred years in the Old Way of marking time?”

Cian nodded. “Aye.”

“And that ’twas Lucan Trevayne who originally paid it?”

“Aye,” Cian replied.

“Hmm,” Dageus said. He paused a moment, then said softly, “Vengeance can be quite the double-edged sword, eh, kinsman?”

Cian shrugged. “Aye. Mayhap. But in this case, ’tis necessary I wield it.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Aye.”

“Some blood is best not spilled, ancestor.”

“Doona be thinking you ken me, Keltar. You don’t.”

“You might be surprised.”

“Doubt it,” Cian clipped. “And you doona ken Lucan. He must die.”

“Why?” Dageus countered. “Because he imprisoned you? You seek vengeance for the slight? Is that vengeance worth everything to you, then?”

“What would you ken of the price of vengeance? What would you ken of the price of anything?”

“I ken many things. I broke the oath of the standing stones and went back in time to undo my twin’s death. For a time I was possessed by the thirteen souls of the Draghar—”

“Christ, you used the stones of Ban Drochaid for personal gain? What are you—mad? Even I gave that legend wide berth!” Cian sounded astonished.

“Appears to be the only thing you gave wide berth,” Drustan said pointedly. “Are you, or aren’t you, a sorcerer, ancestor?”

Jessi bristled. Cian was a good man. She was about to open her mouth and say so, but Cian said coolly, “I have done sorcery. It appears your brother has dispensed with the occasional Keltar oath, as well.”

Right. So there, Jessi thought. Nobody was perfect. She wasn’t quite sure she’d followed whatever it was Dageus had done, but it’d sounded pretty bad.

“Dageus did so of love. You’ve told us neither how you came to bear such extensive protection runes tattooed across your body, nor how you ended up in that mirror.”

“ ‘Protection runes’?” Jessi echoed. “Is that what your tattoos are, Cian? I’ve been meaning to ask you if those runes are a language. What are they for?”

It was Chloe who answered her. “They hold the repercussions of meddling with black magycks at bay,” she clarified helpfully. “I’ve been reading about them lately.”

“Oh.” Jessi blinked, wondering what black magycks Cian had been messing with. She decided there was too much going on at the moment to press him on the subject. Later, when they were alone, she would ask him.

Right now, Cian was holding Drustan’s gaze, his lips curved in a mocking smile. She wasn’t sure she liked that smile. It was cold. It seemed doubly so after the wickedly heated ones she’d seen curving his sensual lips mere hours ago.

“Nor do I plan to discuss it,” Cian growled. “ ’Tis of no consequence. What is—is. What’s been done, cannot be undone. All that matters now is stopping Lucan.”

Dageus began, “Not necessarily—”

“Och, aye, ‘necessarily,’ ” Cian cut him off. “I’ve not yet told you, Keltar, but Trevayne recently located several pages from the Unseelie Dark Book. He’s been hunting it since the ninth century. Are you familiar with the Unseelie relic?”

Dageus’s golden eyes narrowed and he stiffened. “Blethering hell!”

“Precisely,” Cian said flatly.

“He’s seeking the Unseelie Dark Book?” Drustan exclaimed. “Think you he might actually find it?”

“Aye, he will. ’Tis but a matter of time.”

“Wait a minute,” Jessi interjected. “What is ‘the Unseelie Dark Book’?” Although Cian had mentioned it once before, she’d been so preoccupied with her own worries that she’d not absorbed what he’d said.

“Do you know who the Unseelie are, lass?” Drustan asked.

Jessi gave him a dubious look. “Um . . . fairies?” Oh, that just sounded abjectly silly. Even for a girl who now believed in sorcerers and spells and Druids.

But no one else in the room seemed to think so.

Matter-of-factly, Gwen said, “We call them ‘Faery,’ Jessi, but they’re actually a race of beings from another world, an incredibly advanced civilization known as the Tuatha Dé Danaan. They came to Earth thousands of years before the birth of Christ and settled in Ireland.”

Jessi sucked in a breath. “Oh, God—I read about the Tuatha Dé Danaan in the Book of Invasions! They were one of the mythical races, along with the Fir Bolg and the Nemedians. Supposedly they came down from the sky in a cloud of mist and fog. You’re telling me they’re real? That they actually did invade Ireland?”

“Aye. They’re real, though they didn’t invade Ireland—initially they were welcomed there amongst her people,” Dageus said. “It wasn’t until much later that bitter dissension arose. They arrived long before the Book of Invasions purports. And here they remain, though they are now hidden from us. The Tuatha Dé is divided into two courts. The Seelie are the Court of the Light Fae—the ones whom we Keltar serve. The Unseelie are the Court of the Dark—to be given wide berth. Though separate, they are inseparably bound. Some say the Seelie created the Unseelie, others say that the Seelie themselves mutated over time. No one knows for certain. Indeed, ’tis rumored they may not even be of the same race. But all the legends agree that where goes one, so must the other. That they are like the Roman Janus heads of yore—two faces, sharing a single skull.”

“So they came to our world—oh, that’s just so weird!—and brought these Dark Hallows with them?” Jessi asked.

Dageus nodded. “The Unseelie brought the Dark Ones. The Seelie brought the Light Hallows. Both courts have their own relics of power. According to ancient lore, long ago in their past, the horrific Unseelie were somehow ‘contained’ by the Seelie. Though they are here with us, in a manner of speaking, sharing our world, as are the Seelie, the Unseelie cannot leave wherever it is they are being held. ’Tis written in ancient scrolls that shortly after the Tuatha Dé’s arrival on our world there was an uprising and some of the Unseelie nearly broke free. In the skirmish, their Hallows, including the Dark Book, were lost. Men and Fae alike have been searching for these relics of power for thousands of years.

Allegedly, the Dark Glass was originally used to keep one of the Unseelie's mortal mistresses imprisoned. Over time, it has transformed, as many Unseelie things do, into something else. A thing with multiple purposes, or so 'tis said. See that band of black that rims the perimeter?"

Jessi nodded.

" 'Tis said that one day, if enough tithes are paid, the Dark Glass will go full dark, and on that day it will become a different thing entirely, a sentient thing."

Jessi shivered. She looked at Cian. "Did you know that?"

He shook his head. "Nay. But 'tis yet another reason to prevent the tithe."

"No kidding. How creepy!"

"All the Unseelie Hallows are, as you say, 'creepy,' lass," Cian said. " 'Tis their darkness, the chill of them."

"Is it cold inside the mirror?" she asked, recalling how icy the blackness at the edge was.

He shrugged one powerful shoulder. "Aye, lass. At times I feel it more than others. 'Tis naught to fash yourself over." Directing a concerned gaze toward the twins, he said, "Lucan managed to get his hands on three of the Dark Hallows. The thief stole the amulet and box, as well, along with my mirror. I doona ken if Lucan has been able to recover them yet. They may still be out there."

"Och, Christ," Drustan swore softly. "And in some unsuspecting fool's hands!"

"Exactly," Cian said.

"So what's in this Dark Book?" Jessi asked. "What makes it so dangerous?"

"According to what the Draghar knew of it," Dageus said, "it contains spells to open realms, spells to harness time, spells even to unmake worlds. Worse yet, in addition to every manner of Dark enchantment, allegedly therein are also the True Names of the most powerful of the Fae—the Seelie and Unseelie royalty."

"I thought you said 'twas not easy to sort through all the memories the Draghar left in you," Drustan said carefully, searching Dageus's eyes.

Dageus said dryly, “ ’Tis not. It’s like having thirteen thousand-chapter books in my head. In there somewhere is a memory of every last time one of them took a piss. I know of the Dark Book because they wanted me to hunt for it while I was hunting for other tomes in my efforts to escape them. ’Twas much in their minds.” His lips curved in a mocking smile. “ ’Twas not I alone who sought my freedom; they wished greatly to escape *me*. *Among other desires they had.*”

“What about the True Names is so scary?” Jessi asked. How bizarre to think that Dageus had the memories of thirteen other people in his head. She wondered if it ever gave him a headache.

“He who knows a Tuatha Dé’s True Name,” Cian said from within the mirror, “can command that Fae, even unto its own destruction.”

“I thought the Faery were supposed to be immortal,” she protested.

“Mostly they are, lass,” Cian told her. “ ’Tis rare for one to die, nigh impossible to slay one, but it can be done. The Fae possess unfathomable power. In the hands of the wrong man, the Dark Book could be used to harness that power. An unscrupulous man could unleash complete chaos, destroy not merely this world but countless others. Though the Dark Book is written in complex ciphers, and though ’tis rumored these ciphers actually change from opening to opening of the Book, Lucan broke several of the codes in the past when he obtained rubbings. It took him many long years, but he managed it. I’ve no doubt he can do so again.”

“Where do you think the Dark Book has been all this time?” Chloe asked Cian. “Hasn’t it been missing for thousands and thousands of years?”

“Aye. Lucan and I believed that a clan was either appointed or stumbled across it long ago and appointed themselves its guardian, much as the Keltar guard the lore,” Cian said, his gaze dark. “ ’Twould seem that recently, something happened to these guardians, because the person Lucan spoke with told him the Book had surfaced for a brief time and been glimpsed by several people, all of them now dead. This person—who was also killed a few weeks before the mirror was stolen—had been able to obtain a rubbing of the cover and a few of the pages therein before it vanished again.”

“So, people have actually *seen the Book recently!*” Chloe exclaimed.

“Aye.”

“Do we know for sure it really was the Dark Book? The real thing?” Gwen asked.

Cian nodded. “I glimpsed the rubbings of the pages. Lucan was free with what he did in his study. I think in part because he hoped to incite my interest and elicit my aid, for I was always the better sorc—er . . . Druid.”

“And who ended up stuck in a mirror?” Dageus murmured.

Cian bristled, eyes narrowed, nostrils flared.

Dageus shrugged. “I was merely saying.”

Cian and Dageus glowered at each other. Then Cian snorted dismissively and continued. “The Book itself is supposedly so potent that continued exposure to it alters a man, and not for the better. Even the mere rubbings of the pages pulsed with Dark power. Those were no normal sheets of parchment. There is no doubt in my mind ’twas the real thing. There is also no doubt in my mind ’tis inevitable that Lucan will get his hands on it, and sooner rather than later. Obtaining the Dark Book has always been Lucan’s ultimate goal, and he will stop at nothing to attain it. I’ve watched his power and knowledge of Dark Magyck grow over the centuries. He adheres to no rules. He has no sense of honor. I ken the way his mind works. I am the only who can stop him.”

“There are two other Keltar Druids here, kinsman,” Drustan said stiffly. “I’m fair certain we may be of some aid.”

“You’ve no bloody idea what you’re talking about. The mirror makes Lucan immortal, unkillable by your means. You would be of no use. Or are you ready to begin tattooing yourself, kinsman?” Cian said silkily.

Drustan gave him a scornful look.

“I thought not.” The look Cian shot back at him was just as scornful. “A man does what he must. Or he’s no man.”

“What he ‘must’ is debatable. ’Twould not necessarily come to that,” Drustan replied icily.

“Och, aye, it would, you bloody fool. Leave Lucan to me. Stay out of it.”

“I cannot believe this Trevayne is so much more powerful than we.”

Cian's smile dripped dark amusement. "Ah—and *there's the vaunted Keltar ego! I wondered when I'd see it. I made the same mistake. Believed I was so much more powerful. And I was. Yet here I am. And I didn't see it coming. I will deal with Lucan. You've but to grant us sanctuary here until the Feast of All Saints. I will need to lay additional wards when next I am free. Permit that. 'Tis all I ask.*"

Dageus had remained silent while his brother and Cian argued. But now he cocked his head, his golden eyes shimmering strangely. "Now I understand," he said. "So that's why you plan to do it. It made no sense to me. Especially after last eve."

Was it her imagination, or had Cian suddenly gone tense? Jessi eyed him intently.

Her Highland lover's shrug seemed a bit overdone when he said, "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Aye, you do."

"You can't deep-listen to me, not with my guards up, and I've not let them down since we met. You're good, but you're not that good."

"Yet. And I doona need to be. I understand this tithing business."

"Mayhap the knowledge you acquired from those evil Draghar of yours is inaccurate, Druid," Cian said coolly. "I'm sure even they made the occasional error."

"Nay," Dageus said just as coolly. "This I learned from our tomes in the underground chamber while searching for a way to be rid of the thirteen. And I know you've read them too."

"What?" Jessi said, staring from one to the other, sensing the deadly undertow in the ocean of things they weren't saying. "What are you two talking about?"

"Doona do it, kinsman," Cian said abruptly, low and intense. "Leave it. Man to man."

"Nay, 'tis too big a thing to continue speaking around. She has the right to know."

“ ’Tis not your decision to make.”

“I wouldn’t *have to make it if you hadn’t made the wrong one by not telling her.*”

“ ‘Not telling her’ what?” Jessi demanded.

“ ’Tis naught of your concern. Stay the bloody hell out of it,” Cian snarled at Dageus.

“Nay. Not after what transpired between the two of you last eve. She has a right to know. Either you tell her, or I will. ’Tis the only mercy I’ll grant.”

“Cian?” Jessi implored questioningly.

He gazed at her a long silent moment. A muscle in his jaw leapt. He turned abruptly in the mirror.

And disappeared into the silver. It rippled behind him and went flat.

Jessi stared at the looking glass in disbelief. What could be so terrible that, after the incredible intimacy they’d just shared, he would turn his back on her and walk away?

“What’s going on?” She turned a plaintive gaze on Dageus. There was a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, and she knew, just knew, she was about to hear something that was going to make her wish she’d cut her ears off instead.

When Jessi heard Cian murmur a short chant, she knew what was coming and a cry of alarm escaped her. The jeweled blade that had slain the room-service assassin whipped out of the glass and lodged in a wall—behind and a hairsbreadth to the left of Dageus’s temple.

“Doona answer her, you bastard,” came the savage growl from the silvery glass.

“Harm any of mine and I’ll break your blethering mirror,” Drustan said very, very quietly. “Were I not certain you missed deliberately, I’d have done it already.”

Another savage sound rumbled within the mirror, rattling the glass in its frame.

“What?” Jessi repeated weakly. “Tell me what?”

Dageus sighed, his chiseled features grim. “All Tuatha Dé bindings, lass—

whether Seelie compacts or Unseelie indentures—must be periodically reaffirmed by gold. The Keltar Compact, for example, was forged in purest gold, and need only be reaffirmed if something within it is changed, or if 'tis violated by a party to the agreement. But Dark Arts run counter to the nature of things and require higher and more frequent tithes. As Cian said, the Dark Glass must be paid every one hundred years, on the anniversary of the original date of binding, at midnight.”

Sorrowful gold eyes locked with hers, and that sinking sensation became a pit of acid in her stomach.

“Cian was bound on Samhain, lass. If the tithe is not paid by he who initiated the indenture—in this instance, Lucan—at precisely midnight on October thirty-first, the indenture will be violated, and all the years that Cian and Lucan have lived that were not theirs to live, will be called due. At once. In a single moment.”

Silence blanketed the room. It lay there, heavy, suffocating.

“Wh-what are you s-saying?” Jessi stammered.

“You know what I’m saying, Jessica,” Dageus said gently. “Cian came back to Scotland for one reason: to die. That’s his vengeance. That’s his way of keeping Lucan from getting the Dark Book and ending things for once and for all. When the tithe is not paid, they will both die. It’s all over. The immortal sorcerer will be slain, without so much as a drop of blood spilled. All Cian must do is stay out of Lucan’s hands until twelve-oh-one on November first. And he’s right, ’tis truly the simplest, most effective way to end it. Quite tidy, indeed. Drustan and I can then track down the Dark Book and attempt to either restore it to its guardians or protect it ourselves.”

Jessi gaped at Dageus. Abruptly, everything Cian had told her since they’d met—and she now realized it was precious little—tumbled through her mind, and she apprehended it all in a vastly different light. She shook her head, pressing a hand to her mouth.

Now that she knew the truth, it fit together so neatly that she was stunned that she’d not guessed at it before.

Not once had he ever spoken of any moment beyond his “deadline.” Not even when she’d asked what he intended to do once the spell was broken. There’d

never been a “God, it’ll be so good to be free again!” There’d never been any mention of something he might like to do once he’d killed Lucan—maybe see a movie, have a feast, travel the world and stretch his legs a bit. In fact, there’d never even been any mention of him killing Lucan at all. And why would there have been? He’d never planned to actually physically “kill” him.

No new beginnings, he’d said.

He’d known all along he wasn’t going to be free in fifteen days.

He was going to be dead in fifteen days.

Precisely two weeks and one day from today, Cian MacKeltar—the man with whom she’d just spent the most amazing, scorchingly passionate, dazzling night of her life—was going to be no more than a one-thousand-one-hundred-and-sixty-three-year-old pile of dust.

She turned numbly toward the mirror. Her own horrified reflection looked back at her. Cian was nowhere to be seen.

The coward.

Her face was pale, her eyes enormous.

“Oh, you son of a bitch,” she breathed.

Right before she burst into tears.

Quod not cogit amor?
(Is there anything love couldn't make us do?)

—MARTIAL, C.E. c.40–104

23

Jessi stood at the open window of the Silver Chamber, staring down through the dreary day at the misty castle grounds.

Cian was striding across the vast, manicured expanse of front lawn. He'd removed the braids from his hair and it was slicked wetly back from his regal face in a long dark fall. The sky was leaden, the horizon of mountains obscured by dark thunderheads. A light, drizzling rain was falling, and patches of fog clung, here and there, to damp thatches of grass, gusting in drowsy, dreamy swirls as Cian sliced through them.

He was wearing only a plaid, slung low around his hips, and soft leather boots, despite the chill in the air. He looked like a magnificent half-savage ninth-century Highland laird out surveying his mountain domain.

God, he was beautiful.

He was bleeding.

Blood trickled down his rain-slicked chest, slipped between the ridges of muscles in that sculpted stomach that, only the night before last, she'd tasted with her tongue, covered with kisses.

Freshly dyed tattoos covered the right side of his chest and part of his right arm, the tiny needle pricks still beading with a wet sheen of blood. More mystic runes climbed up over his right shoulder and, as he turned down a cobbled stone walkway, she could see that either he or one of the twins had branded a fair portion of his back crimson and black, as well.

Protection runes. *They hold the repercussions of meddling with black magycks at*

bay, Chloe had said.

She was so absorbed in watching him that she didn't hear the door to the bedchamber open and someone slip in until Gwen said softly, "He's transmuting the soil, Jessi. He saw you up here and sent me to find you. He asked me to ask you not to watch."

"Why?" Jessi said tonelessly.

Gwen drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "It's Dark Magyck, Jessi. It has some ghastly side effects, but even Drustan agreed that it was necessary, and believe me, if Drustan agrees to any kind of Dark Magyck or alchemy being used on Keltar land, there's a *really good reason for it.*"

A faint, bitter smile curved Jessi's lips. There was so much love and pride in Gwen's voice for her husband. She knew she would have felt the same about Cian in time—if she'd been given the time. But he'd never had any intention of giving her more than a few weeks from the very first.

"It will neutralize Lucan's powers if he comes here," Gwen told her, "and Cian is convinced he will."

"If the bastard comes here, can we kill him?" Jessi said fiercely. "If the wards have neutralized him?"

"No. The glass keeps him immortal, just like Cian, Jessi. He can't be killed. The wards will only inhibit his use of sorcery on Keltar land. He won't be able to work spells and he won't be able to enter the castle proper. Cian is doing the most intense warding around the perimeter of the castle walls. It's why he wants you not to watch. Apparently, if anything is dead within the castle grounds, his wards will raise it until he, well . . . er . . . inters it again with a ritual burial somewhere else."

"Let me guess. Without his protection runes, those reanimated dead things might turn on him?"

"He didn't say. But that's kind of what I guessed too. And in Scottish soil, God-only-knows-where people and things are buried. This country's had quite the turbulent past."

Jessi shivered and fell silent again. Sorcerers, spells, and now dead-things-

walking. She shook her head. How strange and terrible her life had become.

In the past forty-eight hours, she'd soared to the greatest heights she'd ever known, only to plummet into the deepest abyss. She'd been blissfully, idiotically thinking she'd found her soul mate, only to discover that said soul mate was not only going to die in two weeks' time, but she was going to be forced to occupy a front-row seat to the spectacle.

Dageus and Drustan had confined her to the castle. She was not allowed to leave unless and until they said otherwise. They believed that if she left, Lucan would either try to use her to get to Cian (frankly, she wasn't sure he'd care—why care about her body when he'd not cared about her heart?) or kill her outright if he got his hands on her. She bought into the killing-her-outright part, which meant she had to stay put if she wanted to survive.

Which meant she had to watch her Highlander die.

"Dageus and Drustan are trying to find another way, Jessi," Gwen said softly. "Some alternative to get Cian out of the glass and defeat Lucan."

"If Cian knows of no way, then do you really think they'll be able to find one? Nothing against your husband and his brother, but Cian is the only one here that seems to know anything about sorcery."

"You can't give up hope, Jessi."

"Why not? Cian did," she said bitterly. "He's ready to die."

Gwen sucked in a breath. "It's the only way he knows to stop Lucan, Jessi. At least right now it is. Let my husband and Dageus work on it. You'd be amazed at what the two of them can accomplish. But don't hate Cian for this. Oh, he was wrong not to tell you—you'll get no argument from me there. I'd be devastated too. And furious. And hurt. And devastated and furious and hurt all over again. But I think you need to ponder *why he didn't tell you. And think about this, too: you're twenty-something years old, right?*"

Jessi nodded. Below her, Cian was entering a small copse of rowan trees, moving with sleekly muscled, animal grace through gossamer milky-white tendrils of fog. "Twenty-four."

"Well, he's lived, let's see—forty-seven-point-one-six times that long—almost

fifty times as long as you have, trapped inside a looking glass. Living not even a mere reflection of a life. For more than a thousand years he's been by himself, imprisoned, powerless. He told us a bit last night, after supper, while you were sleeping. He has no physical needs in there. He has had nothing with which to pass the time. Lucan never gave him any word of his clan once he'd incarcerated him. He'd believed, for the past millennium, that Lucan had wiped out his entire family, that the Keltar line had been destroyed. It's why he never thought of looking for any descendants; why it didn't occur to him that Dageus might be a Keltar when they met. The only companion he had in that mirror with him was his bitter regret and his determination to kill Lucan one day. The opportunity finally presented itself. Is it really a wonder to you that he might be willing to die to take down his enemy, rather than continue living in such a hellish fashion? It's a wonder to me that the man didn't go insane centuries ago."

Tears burned the backs of Jessi's eyes. And she'd thought she'd cried herself out yesterday. She'd wondered the same thing—how he'd stayed sane. But then she'd realized he was a mountain.

Yesterday had been the most awful day of her life. If she could have collected together all the tears she'd ever cried, beginning with that first wailed protest at the shock of being born, through childhood pains, adolescent indignities, and womanly hurts, they'd not have made a drop in the bucket of tears she'd wept yesterday.

When Dageus had explained to her what Cian meant to do, she'd raced from the library as fast as her feet had been able to take her. She'd tried to flee the castle, as well, but Dageus had caught up with her and stopped her, gently rerouting her upstairs to the chamber they'd readied for her.

She'd locked herself in and collapsed across the bed, weeping. Eventually she'd sobbed herself into a deep, exhausted sleep. The worst of it was, the whole time she'd been crying, hating him for making her care about him, knowing he was going to die, and not telling her, every ounce of her had nonetheless ached to go back downstairs and sit as close to his damned mirror as she could possibly get. To regain that intense, tender intimacy they'd just shared. To touch the glass, if she couldn't touch him. To settle for anything at all.

To beg for crumbs.

She'd thought of what Gwen had said, herself, yesterday. She'd had the

occasional lucid moments in her self-pitying and furious delirium.

Yes, of course she could see how he would not just be willing to die, but might actually be ready to embrace death after an eternity in a cold stone hell all by himself.

Understanding didn't make it any better.

*She'd read once, in one of those magazines like *Woman's Day* or *Reader's Digest*, about a nurse who'd fallen in love with one of her terminal patients, a man who had no more than ten or twelve months left to live from some disease or another. The article hadn't been her cup of tea, but she'd gotten sucked into it, victim of the same morbid fascination that made rubberneckers of people passing the scene of a gruesome car wreck splashed with blood and strewn with body bags. She'd thought how incredibly stupid the nurse had been to let it happen. She should have transferred his case to someone else the moment she'd started liking him, and fallen in love with a different man.*

At least the nurse had gotten nearly a year.

Her terminal patient had a mere fourteen days.

"Go away, please," Jessi said.

"Jessi, I know we don't know each other very well—"

"You're right, Gwen, we don't. So, please, just leave me alone for a while. You can tell him I won't watch. I promise." And she meant it. She would respect his wishes. Moving woodenly, she closed the window, flipped the latch, and let the heavy damask drape fall over the mullioned panes.

There was silence behind her.

"Please go, Gwen."

A few moments later there was a gusty sigh, then the chamber door clicked softly shut.

Lucan threaded his fingers through his hair, smoothing it back from his temples. His palms were hot, the flesh singed, his nails blackened.

No matter. In a moment, the lingering traces of Hans's misfortune would be gone.

He stepped over the charred body dispassionately.

It smelled and needed to be removed from the pub.

Wending his way through the posh, paneled bar with its high-backed wooden booths cushioned in tufted leather upholstery, Lucan murmured a series of spells beneath his breath, concealing from the pub's animated patrons both the man he'd just scorched to a cinder, and his true appearance.

Centuries ago, tattoos had taken what remained of his face, including his ears, eyelids, lips, and tongue, making him far too memorable to observers. Even his nails had been removed and tattooed beneath. His eyes had changed shortly after he'd finished scoring the final black-and-crimson brands inside his nose. He'd ceded his dick and testicles long before his tongue, his eyelids in advance of those sensitive inner nasal mucous membranes, though by then he'd suffered no pain. People often had a strongly unfavorable reaction to the face of a sorcerer.

He shouldn't have agreed to meet Hans in a pub. Lately, several of his employees had displayed a preference for public meeting places.

As if that made any difference.

Cian MacKeltar had indeed returned to the Highlands. As Lucan had known he would. The bastard wanted to die in Scotland. As Lucan had known he would.

According to his late employee, the castle the ninth-century Highlander had once lived in was now occupied by Christopher and Maggie MacKeltar and their children.

But it was not *that castle and its occupants that concerned him*.

It was the other one. The one he'd not known existed.

A second castle had been constructed on a distant part of the MacKeltar estate at some time during the sixteenth century, years after he'd quit paying attention to that rocky, barbaric little corner of the Highlands. It was currently occupied by twin Keltar males.

With old names.

Dageus and Drustan.

Who the fuck were they and from beneath what fucking rock had they crawled?

It was in that castle, or so Hans had suspected, that the mirror was being kept. A man and a woman fitting Cian and Jessi St. James's description had been seen in a store in Inverness. There Hans had encountered the confusion typical of the aftereffects of Voice, but he'd managed to obtain the information that a heretofore unknown Keltar, one of the twins, Dageus, had driven off in a vehicle with a large, ornate mirror in the back of it. The employee had recalled the mirror because "that tattooed guy" had been obsessive about it not getting broken, rearranging it three times and padding it with blankets before permitting other items to be loaded in with it.

Lucan had not anticipated this.

He'd expected Cian to head for the hills. To be in the wide open. He'd expected to be facing one MacKeltar, not three; two of them complete unknowns. In a castle that was probably warded to the fucking rafters.

He frowned over his shoulder at the crisply blackened remains of Hans. It would remain concealed by his spell for a few moments more. Then one pubgoer or another would take note of the grisly corpse on the floor, women would scream, and men would mill about, gaping, readying their stories for watercooler chats in the morning. Law enforcement would be rung. Lucan quickened his pace, pushing his way through the boisterous after-work crowd.

It was damned inconvenient for Hans to be dead right now.

There were other matters to which Lucan would have liked him to attend. He'd not killed him—oh no, not he—he'd brooked no quarrel with Hans. The power within him was occasionally wont to act with a will of its own. It was part of being such a great sorcerer. The vessel of his tattooed body was no longer sufficient to completely contain his greatness. Magic sometimes overflowed, leaked out, and someone got burned. Literally. Lucan chuckled dryly.

Surely he was the greater sorcerer by now.

Fourteen days.

His crimson eyes lit with mirth and he was taken by a sharp bark of laughter,

struck by the sheer absurdity of the thought that he—Lucan Myrddin Trevayne—could die.

Impossible.

As he quit the pub and stepped into the chilly London evening, he considered his next step. A cry of shock and horror chased him through the closing tavern door into the drizzly night beyond.

He would return to his residence and take another stab at securing a connection with the St. James woman. He'd been attempting regularly to reach her again, but either she was not logging into her account, or he was missing those windows of opportunity when she was.

Women were weak links. There was always something in them begging to be exploited. He just had to find it. Exploit it.

He would punish the Keltar for this. Wasting his time. Taking him away from his true purpose. His destiny.

Only this morning an unusual man with long coppery hair and shimmering copper eyes had sought him out, claiming to have knowledge of the ciphers in which the Dark Book was written. The man had dripped a deep-seated arrogance that could only have been born of some kind of power—either his own, or close association with someone who made him feel fearless. Lucan's first instinct had been to eliminate the man. From time to time an apprentice petitioned mentoring, or a rival sorcerer dispatched a spy. Lucan never suffered such fools to live. He didn't trust anyone who'd managed to learn of him, penetrate the layers of his many identities, and locate him.

But then the man had told him he'd actually lived among the Fae for a time, he'd been familiar with the runes on the Hallows, and he'd spoken a tongue he'd alleged was that of the Tuatha Dé themselves. He'd also displayed an intimate knowledge of the Seelie and Unseelie courts. It had been enough to stay Lucan's hand.

Whoever, whatever, the man was, he needed him alive until he'd stripped from him what knowledge he possessed. It took time to perform a ruthless deep-probing. And until the Dark Glass was secured, such critical matters had to be suspended. He'd been forced to allow the man to leave, telling him he'd get in touch.

Oh yes, Cian would be punished. For delaying his plans, wasting his time, and tying up his resources at such a crucial hour. The men Hans had been searching with in the Highlands, those who'd been watching the airports and others he'd been preparing to ward around the Highlander when he found him, if necessary, all were men who could have been following the latest lead on the Dark Book.

He wondered how the arrogant Keltar would like spending the next thousand years hung in a deep, dark cavern, flush to a stone wall. He'd only kept the mirror in his study for the amusement it had given, and because, on occasion, he'd needed his captive to perform some deed he'd not yet possessed the power to do himself. But once he had the Dark Book, he would never need the Druid again.

And then Cian MacKeltar was going to rot in the deepest, coldest, blackest hell Lucan could find for him.

Under ideal circumstances, Jessi might have spent days brooding. Weeks, even. When she was hurt, she preferred to hole up and lick her wounds alone.

But circumstances were far from ideal, and days were precisely what she *didn't have. As for weeks—she had two. Period. By the time she finished licking wounds, she would have a much bigger one to tend.*

And then she would despise herself for time wasted.

Cian had either finished placing his wards, or the mirror had reclaimed him again. She knew because, a little while ago, she'd heard people out on the lawn, laughing and talking. She'd pushed aside the drapes to find diffident rays of late-afternoon sunlight trying to push through thick gray clouds and several castle maids standing about, hands on hips, eyes sparkling, flirting with a handful of well-muscled gardeners who were trimming hedges on the still-damp lawn.

She'd been startled to realize how late in the day it was. She'd passed most of it staring into space, trying to mull through thoughts hopelessly muddled by emotions, and decide if Cian was a callous bastard who'd just wanted to have sex before he [insert word she refused to say, even in her mind] or if he cared for her at all.

She could argue the case both ways.

You fit me here, woman, he'd said.

And when she remembered him saying those words, and the look on his face as he'd said them, she believed him.

Especially when she remembered it, coupled with the way he'd made love to her in front of the fire. And again later, in the shower. She could have sworn she'd felt a part of him bleeding into her through his hands, that he'd been cherishing every last cell of her being with his caresses.

Yet there was a cynical part of her that said a dying man after a millennia-old blood-vengeance might say just about anything to get: a) somewhere safe so he could *have his vengeance*; and b) *hey, what about a little great sex along the way with the big-boobed babe?*

Bottom line was, the big-boobed babe had finally realized that she wasn't going to get anywhere sitting in her room alone, groping blindly through her thoughts.

So she decided to go find him, and grope blindly through his thoughts—assuming he would cooperate—and see what might come of it.

It ended up being far more than his thoughts she groped.

Cian stood in the library, near the fire, and finished plaiting the last of the braids into his hair.

He slipped the remaining tricolored bead around it, compressing the soft metal between his finger and thumb, molding it to the end. A sorcerer did not risk any other elements on his body when working dark alchemy. He gathered his arm cuffs from the mantel and refastened them around his wrists.

The warding was now complete, the castle grounds protected. There hadn't been as many dead things in the soil as he'd expected, likely due to the lesser, ancient wards he'd discovered, and removed, before sowing his own.

Keltar soil was clean earth, strong and potent. His wards had intensified that potency to a nearly palpable degree. Indeed, as he'd walked over it, returning to the castle proper, he'd felt the power of his wards humming beneath his heels.

None of Lucan's sorcery would be of any avail to him on the castle-proper portion of the estate now.

Upon completing his task, he'd washed up and hurried to the library to advise his descendants that the job was done. He'd found the twins and their wives cozied up to a crackling fire.

There was not a single place he could look in the book-lined room that did not bring to mind intoxicatingly sensual, carnal memories of his night with Jessica. Their bodies had come together with every bit of the explosive passion he'd known they would.

The entire time he'd been laying wards, he'd kept his thoughts tightly focused on the task at hand. But now they burst free of his tight rein and turned hungrily, desperately to his woman.

"How is she?" he asked.

It was Gwen who answered. "Furious. Hurt."

"And hurt. And furious," Chloe added.

"What did you expect?" Drustan said stiffly. "You seduce her and doona tell her you're dying? Have you no honor, kinsman?"

Cian said nothing. He'd not explain himself to Drustan, nor to any man. Only one woman's opinion of him mattered, and even that wouldn't have stopped him. He'd done what he'd done and didn't wish it undone. Undone, he'd not have gotten his night. And though Jessica may think him a thousand kinds of bastard, he would have another night with her, and another still.

As many nights as he could beg, borrow, or steal from her until he was naught but dust blowing on a dark Scots wind.

"Where is she?" The mirror still hadn't reclaimed him. It had been imperative he lay the warding, but now that 'twas done, he wasn't about to fritter away another precious moment of his time free of the glass.

As Gwen opened her mouth to reply, the library door eased open and Jessica poked her head in.

Her broody jade gaze fixed on Gwen. She didn't see Cian at first.

Faded blue jeans cased those sexy legs that had so recently been wrapped around his ass, her ankles locked in the small of his back, while he'd pounded into her. They hugged low on her hips, revealing the creamy sun-kissed skin of her belly, upon which he'd spilled drops of his seed. A soft, dainty, lacy-woven pale green sweater was buttoned over her heavy, round breasts.

It seemed an eternity since he'd touched her.

"I was wondering where— Oh!" The words died on her tongue when she saw him. "There you are."

Cian assessed her with the instincts of a hunter born for the kill. He'd slammed up against that sleek cool wall inside her skull so many times he no longer bothered trying to read her that way. He read her body instead.

So that was the way of it. The same way it was for him. Mindless, thoughtless need. It had her by the balls too. So to speak.

He devoured the space between them in a few aggressive strides.

Her eyes widened. She wet her lips and they parted—not in protest, but in instinctive preparation. Her eyes dilated, her legs moved slightly apart, her breasts lifted. Christ, he felt just the same way.

He saw her—he needed her.

He closed a hand on her shoulder, opened the door, backed her out into the corridor, and yanked the door shut behind them, dispensing with the MacKeltar with a single slam. Just like that, they ceased to exist.

There was only Jessica.

The corridor was long, high-ceilinged, lit by pale yellow wall torches and the fiery glow of a crimson sun sinking beyond tall mullioned windows. He backed her across the hall, pushing her up against the wall. He could feel the heat rolling off her, knew it was coming off him too. He could smell her arousal, could smell his own. What was between them was quite simply a force of nature.

As she hit stone, she gritted, with a little *oomph of breath*, “*You son of a bitch!*”

“You said that yesterday. I heard you then.” If he'd had enough time—like a lifetime—to do things differently, he'd never have given her a reason to call him such a thing. If only he'd met her when he'd been but a score of years, or nay, if they'd been betrothed at birth, grown up together, hand in hand in the Highlands, his life would have been so different. He would have been a deeply contented man, and on that snowy night Lucan had knocked, he'd have been in bed with his wife. With a babe or two nearby. A sorcerer's spells and enchantments would have held no lure for him. Nothing would have, not beyond this woman. He would never have accompanied Trevayne to Ireland, would never have ridden beside him for Capscorth on a sweet spring day, only to usher in the night with the blood of an entire village on his hands.

“You ruthless bastard!”

“I know.” There was no denying it. What he’d done was wrong. He should have told her from the beginning. He should have given her the choice to decide whether she was willing to give any part of herself to a man condemned to die.

“You heartless prick!”

“Aye, woman. All that and more.” He’d known who she was all along. He’d known from the moment he’d first laid a hand on her, back there in the office of her university, when he’d swept her behind him to protect her from Roman.

He’d felt it right then, in the marrow of his bones.

That thing he’d waited so damned long to feel, that had never come. He’d thought thirty years so unbearably long to wait. He’d never have imagined it might take him 1,133 more years to find her, and then he’d only get twenty days into which he’d have to cram a lifetime. Och, aye, he’d felt it that night. His hand had closed on her upper arm and his entire being had hissed a single, silent word.

Mine.

He’d blinded himself to the truth, all the while determinedly pursuing her, because if, at any moment, he’d admitted she was his one true mate, he might have wavered in his resolve. And he was a man who never wavered. He decided. He committed. He paid for what he purchased. For this sin, he had no doubt he would pay with his soul.

And consider it worth it.

“I can’t believe you lied to me!”

“I know.” Knowing she was his mate, knowing she would live on after him, and undoubtedly find a husband and make a family with some other man, he’d tried to burn himself into her, to conquer some small corner of her heart.

He was supposed to have been her man. He was supposed to have been the father of her children. Not some twenty-first-century asshole that would touch her breasts and kiss her soft mouth and fill her up and never be good enough for her.

Not that he was good enough for her. Still, it was supposed to have been him.

"I hate you for this!"

He flinched, hating those words. "I know."

"So what the hell do you have to say for yourself?"

He clamped her face between his hands and stared into her eyes. "Fourteen days," he hissed. "'Tis all I've left. What would you have of me? Apologies? Self-recrimination? You'll get none."

"Why?" she cried, tears springing to her eyes.

"Because I knew the moment I saw you," he ground out savagely, her "I hate you" still ringing in his ears, "that in another life—a life where I didn't become a dark sorcerer—you were my wife. I cherished you. I adored you. I loved you until the end of time, Jessica MacKeltar. But I doona get to have that life. So I'll take you any fucking way I can get you. And I'll not apologize for one moment of it."

She went motionless in his arms. She stared up at him, her lovely green eyes wide. "Y-you l-loved me?"

He inhaled sharply. "Aye." Staring down at her, something in him melted. "Och, lass," he relented, "I will rue for all eternity every moment of suffering I've caused you. The entire time I'm burning in Hell, I'll regret each tear I made you weep. But if Hell were the price for twenty days with you, I'd condemn myself again and again."

She sagged back against the wall, her lashes fluttering down, her eyes closing.

He waited, watching her, committing every last cell of her face to his memory. From her tousled raven curls to her thick, dark lashes staining sooty crescents on her cheeks, glistening with a sheen of unshed tears, to her dainty, crooked nose to her luscious, soft lips to the stubborn thrust of her chin. He was going to die remembering it. He felt as if he'd been born already knowing her face. That he'd been watching, always waiting to see it coming at him from just around the next corner.

But it hadn't come.

And he'd stopped believing in the Keltar legends of a true mate.

And he strayed into Dark Magycks.

"Mine," he whispered fiercely, looking down at her.

Her eyes fluttered open then. In their jade depths he saw pain, rawness, and grief, but he also saw understanding.

"You know what the sad thing is?" she said softly.

He shook his head.

"I think that if you'd told me the truth from the beginning, I'd just have slept with you sooner."

He winced, as time-lost-never-to-be-regained sliced like a knife through his heart. Then he realized that she'd just granted him an absolution he could never deserve. She'd said, *Even knowing, I would have anyway. Wee woman, heart of a warrior.*

"So take me, Cian. Take me as many times as you can." Her voice broke on the next words. *"Because no matter how many times we get to have, it's not going to be enough."*

"I know, love, I know," he said roughly.

He wasted no more time. He took her. Cupping her face between his big hands, he kissed her, sliding his hot velvety tongue deep. Threading his fingers into her silky curls, he cradled her head delicately, tipping her at just the right angle.

Jessi melted against him. *You were my wife,* he'd said. *I loved you until the end of time. Jessica MacKeltar,* he'd called her, as if he really *had* married her in another life.

She'd wanted such words. She'd neither expected nor been prepared for them. The moment he'd said them, she'd realized that it would have been kinder if he'd not said them at all. If he'd let her think him a callous prick, let her hate him.

But his words would keep her from ever being able to hate him. They'd ripped her open, ruthlessly exposing her heart. Her anger had dropped away as if it had

never been, leaving only a desperation akin to his: to have whatever she could have of him, for so long as she could have it. Because she felt it too. As if they were supposed to have made a direct hit, to have had a full, long, crazy, wild, passion-filled, child-strewn life together, but somehow they'd come at each other from the wrong angle, and missed what could have/would have/should have been.

If she thought about it, it would tear her into little pieces. She refused to drown in sorrow. She would drown instead in the exquisiteness of this moment. There would be time for grief later. Too much time. A freaking lifetime.

But now, her man was kissing her. Now, his powerful hands were hot on her bare skin, slipping beneath her sweater. Now, he was gripping her by the waist, and lifting her against him.

She wrapped her legs around him and locked her ankles behind his back, as he backed her into the wall, kissing her passionately.

She had now.

And she wasn't going to waste a single precious moment of it.

Gwen smiled over her shoulder at Drustan as he followed her to the door.

Shortly after their ninth-century ancestor had risen without a word and stalked from the room with Jessi, Gwen had realized it was nearly dinnertime. And a good thing, too, as she'd completely forgotten lunch in all the fuss today and her stomach was growling hungrily.

But upon Cian's departure, Dageus and Drustan had promptly gotten into a heated discussion about him. It had taken her a good ten minutes to regain their attention and propose they move their conversation to the dining room.

Now, opening the door, she began to step out into the corridor.

"Oh, my," she said faintly.

She retreated right back into the library and gently closed the door. "Um, why don't we just, um, stay here in the library for a little while. Who wants to play Pente?" she said brightly. "I'm not as hungry as I thought I was." She turned and

butted nose to ribs with Drustan.

He caught her by the shoulders. “Why, lass? Is aught amiss? What’s out there?” Drustan stepped back, staring down at her, perplexed.

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

He raised a dark, slanted brow. “Well, then, let’s be off—”

“Oh no, not just yet.” She beamed up at him. Backing herself flush to the door, she draped herself casually against it. “Let’s stay here. Another half hour or so should, be, er, just about right.” She blinked, looking uncertain. “I hope.”

Drustan cocked his head, studied her a moment, then began to reach behind her for the doorknob.

Gwen sighed. “Don’t, Drustan. We can’t leave just yet. Cian and Jessi are out there.”

“ ‘Out there’?” Drustan said blankly, stopping midreach. “So? Will we not fit past them in the corridor?”

“I’m sure we could if we tried. I’m not sure we’d want to,” Gwen said meaningfully.

He regarded her expectantly.

She tried again. “You know, they’re *out there*.”

Drustan continued to regard her expectantly.

“Oh, Gwen,” Chloe cooed excitedly, “do you mean *out there*?”

Gwen nodded.

“Ha!” Chloe exclaimed. “I knew that woman wasn’t stupid.”

“Wait a minute. They’re out there?” Dageus said disbelievingly. “The two of them are out there in the corridor? I put over a hundred rooms in this castle, and they’re bloody out there in the bloody corridor as if they couldn’t find a door to a chamber? ’Tis not as if I concealed them—there’s only one every few bloody paces or so. Is it so much effort to turn a doorknob?”

A muscle leapt in Drustan's jaw, his eyes narrowed. "Lass, are you telling me that Cian and Jessica are tooping in that corridor? Is that why you closed that door?"

Blushing, she nodded.

"You saw this? Nay, that was a stupid question. Of course you did. What, exactly, did you see, lass?"

"Me? Oh, nothing." She folded her arms over her chest and stared off at a point somewhere east of his elbow.

"Gwendolyn?" He crossed his arms and waited.

"Okay, so maybe I saw a little," Gwen admitted, "but he has her up against the wall and all I saw was his butt, and I closed my eyes the minute I saw it."

"You saw my ancestor's arse?" Drustan said frostily. "His bare arse? Had the man any clothing on at all?" He began reaching past her again, for the doorknob.

She waved his hand away. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Drustan, you saw him when he left. All he had on to begin with was his plaid. What do you think?"

Drustan's nostrils flared. "I think the man's a blethering savage."

"Aye," Dageus agreed.

"Oh, you two should talk," Chloe said, laughing. "And Dageus, need I remind you of some of the places you and I—"

"Case argued and won, lass," he said hastily.

"I hardly saw a thing," Gwen assured Drustan. "It's not like I held the door open and stared or anything, even though he is a MacKeltar." She blinked. "And he certainly was every inch a MacK—" She broke off hastily, looking abashed, and feigned a sudden fascination with her cuticles. "What I meant was just that you MacKeltars are a fine-looking lot of men, Drustan, and he is related to you, actually, he precedes you in the gene pool, which might explain . . . Oh, dear, I should probably just shut up now, shouldn't I?" She pressed her lips together.

"That seals it," Drustan said calmly. "I'm going to have to kill the man."

It was Dageus who put things back into perspective. “You doona mean that, Drustan, nor could you if you did. So long as he’s bound to the mirror he can’t be killed. But doona fash yourself. The poor bastard will be dead in a fortnight anyway and he’ll ne’er toop his mate in our corridor again.”

Drustan winced and a bleak expression entered his eyes. He stared down at Gwen a moment, then gathered her gently in his arms and held her.

Dageus pulled his wife close, as well, remembering a time when he’d not believed he had much more time with his mate himself.

Half an hour later, it was a somber foursome that peeped cautiously out into the corridor before attempting to go to dinner again.

Jessi awoke late at night, alone, in a bedchamber.

She and Cian had eventually become cognizant of where they were—and just how public it was—and had stumbled from the corridor into a nearby bedchamber.

She stirred in the great big, down-filled, canopied bed, nestled in a warm mound of velvety blankets. She pushed a hand through her wrecked curls; she didn’t need to see a mirror to know she had major bed-head. At the edges of her consciousness a terrible reality knocked, seeking entrance to her thoughts, but she refused to grant it an audience. Now was now. Later would come soon enough.

She smiled. She’d fallen asleep in bed with her Highlander’s strong arms wrapped around her, spooning her backside to his front side, with one of his powerful legs draped over hers.

A perfect memory, she committed it to a special corner of her mind where each moment she had with him would be immortalized. These memories she would make with him now would have to last her a lifetime.

She pushed herself up and slipped from the bed, dropping barefoot onto the floor. She dressed swiftly and hurried for the door, wanting to be with him every possible moment.

But when she ducked her head into the dimly-lit library—the castle had been put

to bed along with its occupants hours ago—the mirror wasn't where she'd last seen it, and a stab of blind panic made her chest feel dangerously tight.

"We moved it, lass," a soft voice cut through the darkness.

She jumped, peering into the dim room. By the soft red glow of the embers of a dying fire, she could make out a man's shape in an armchair near the hearth. Stacks of books surrounded him on both sides and he was paging through another.

"Drustan? Dageus?" By voice alone she couldn't tell them apart.

" 'Tis Dageus, lass. Why can't I deep-read you, Jessica?"

Jessi shrugged. "I think it's because I was injured when I was young and I have a metal plate in my head. When Cian uses his Voice-spell on other people, it feels itchy inside my skull."

He was silent a moment, then snorted with laughter. "Och, 'tis too perfect. 'Tis also exactly what it feels like—a smooth, cold, hard barrier. It must shield you from magyck somehow. You said 'other people.' Has he ever tried to use Voice on *you*?"

"Yes," *she said. "It doesn't work."*

Dageus gave another soft laugh. "Despite how bloody powerful he is, Cian can't deep-listen to you, either, can he?"

"I don't think so. He told me none of his magyck works on me."

"Good," he said slowly. "That's very good."

She thought that an odd thing to say and began to press, but he spoke again swiftly. "Are you all right, Jessica?"

She shrugged again. What could she possibly say? *I'm both happier and more alive than I've ever been and I feel like I'm dying, too? And I suspect before this is over, I'll wish I was. She said instead, "Where is the mirror?"*

"We moved it to the great hall at his request. When I built this castle I buried four wardstones beneath the entry: east, west, north, and south. They are massive stones and I spelled them myself. He sensed their potency and asked

that the mirror be hung on the landing of the stairs. 'Twill grant him the greatest protection. He is determined Lucan not be able to reach the Dark Glass." He paused, and she had the sense Dageus was not pleased with his ancestor. "He will have his vengeance, lass, no matter the cost."

She already knew that and was in no mood to discuss it. There was a bitter stew bubbling inside her, but she was not yet ready to ladle deep down into it. She would taste the richness first. She nodded briskly. "Thank you." She slipped from the library.

Twenty minutes later, Jessi had what she needed.

While she spread the comforters and throws and pillows at the base of the mirror on the wide expanse of landing in the great hall, Cian stood framed in the mirror, watching her every move. When she was cozily scrunched into the blankets, curled on her side, facing the mirror, she smiled drowsily up at him.

"Good night, Cian."

"Good night, Jessica. Dream sweet, lass."

"You too."

He was kind enough to not remind her that he neither slept nor dreamed while in the minor.

And Jessica made a sleepy entry in a mental diary.

Memory/Day Fourteen: We said good night tonight like a married couple who'd been together for years and years.

So what if he was in a mirror and she was sleeping on the floor.

It was still a fine memory.

Days sped by on winged feet.

Jessi'd always thought that was such a cliché: time speeding by on winged feet; time flies when you're having fun; or as Cian had once put it so simply—time is of the veriest essence.

Yes, it was.

Suddenly all the clichés in the world were true. Each and every one made perfect sense to her. Those love songs on the radio that had once made her roll her eyes and tune the dial to Godsmack instead now reduced her to sappy sentimentality in moments. She'd even caught herself humming the maudlin melody of a country-music song the other day and she'd never liked country music.

Last year she'd read *The Stranger by Albert Camus in French for extra foreign-language credits. Not her cup of tea, though it had given her food for thought, including the existential contention that death made brothers of all men.*

Jessi now knew the truth was that love made brothers—and sisters—of all people. As different as they were, love was that common, defining ground, making everyone the same giddy, delirious fools for it in a thousand and one ways.

Like countless women before her, from tender teens to wise seniors welcoming a second wind, Jessi began keeping a diary to forever capture her memories.

Memory/Day Thirteen: Today we kissed in all one hundred and fifty-seven rooms in the castle (including closets, utility rooms and bathrooms!).

Memory/Day Twelve: We had a midnight picnic of smoked salmon and cheeses and three bottles of wine (my aching head!) on the castle grounds beneath a star-drenched sky and, while everyone else slept, we swam nude in the garden fountain and made love on all three tiers.

Memory/Day Eleven: We chased the cooks from the kitchen and made chocolate-chip pancakes with raspberry jam and whipped cream.

What they'd done with that raspberry jam and whipped cream had had very little to do with eating. The pancakes, that was.

But not all of the memories were good. She couldn't hide in some of the memories. Some of them slapped her in the face with truth.

Memory/Day Ten: Lucan Trevayne came today.

Lucan stood at the line of demarcation between Keltar-warded land and Trevayne-warded land, staring up at the castle. He toed arrogantly up to it, though he didn't care for the feeling at all. The Keltar's power hummed in the earth beneath his feet, trying to push past the invisible boundary, butting up against his own wards.

It had taken him all night and the efforts of a dozen well-trained men to secure this portion of land, enough for him to accomplish his aims. By the light of a pale moon, while the castle slept, they'd spelled the soil, from the sleek black limousine readied behind him for a swift departure, up to the circle of estate Cian had claimed for himself.

Now he stood approximately two hundred yards from the castle proper, waiting. The Highlander hadn't wasted time and resources warding more than the immediate grounds, nor had there been any reason to. Lucan was effectively barred from the castle by this meager yet insurmountable perimeter, as Cian had known he would be.

So long as he did not cross that boundary, Cian couldn't use sorcery on him. So long as Cian did not cross it, Lucan couldn't use sorcery on him, either. As they were both immortal and self-healing, they couldn't harm each other with anything else. They'd mastered long ago the exact wards that neutralized the other's power. This was the only way reclusive sorcerers were ever willing to meet, toe-to-toe on neutralized ground. Cian would not cross the line, nor would Lucan, unless a temper could be provoked, and they were both too smart for that.

Though he was immortal and could not be physically slain, he could be bespelled. If he were fool enough to stray onto Cian's warded ground, the

Highlander could trap him and cocoon him in a mystic stasis, as helpless as a fly in a thick, sticky spider's web.

Eventually, Lucan might figure out how to break free, but he had very little time left to take chances with. And he'd never been willing to wager on the outcome of a battle of spells between him and the Highlander.

The situation at this second Castle Keltar was far worse than he'd imagined. He could feel the potency of two Keltar Druids in this new castle, about whom he knew nothing but for this—their power was as old as their names. They were strong. Not like Cian. But also not like any other Druid he'd ever encountered.

He'd arrived yesterday afternoon and swiftly gotten the lay of the land: There was no way he was going to be able to get inside that castle without help.

Which was why they'd spent the night warding, why he was standing here now.

His wits would have to serve him again, as they had so well eleven hundred and thirty-three years ago.

"Trevayne." Cian's nostrils flared as he spat the word.

"Keltar," Lucan spat it back, as though the vilest of viles had passed across his tongue—a tongue so heavily tattooed it was blackened with dye.

That tongue had spoken such sordid spells and lies that it should have rotted from the dark sorcerer's mouth, as his soul had rotted from his body so long ago.

"You don't look ready to die to me," Lucan taunted.

Cian laughed softly. "I've been ready to die for over a thousand years, Trevayne."

"Really? I have pictures of your woman. She looks like quite the fuck. I'm going to find out once the tithe is paid."

"The tithe will never be paid, Trevayne."

"You're going to watch us together, Highlander. I'll push her up against your mirror and—"

Cian turned around and began walking back toward the castle. “You waste my time, Trevayne.”

“Why did you come out, then, Keltar?”

Cian turned around, walked back to the line and toed it. He stood so close that their noses nearly touched. The width of a hair kept them separate and safe from each other, no more.

Lucan saw movement behind the Highlander. The woman had just stepped out onto the top stair of the elaborate stone entryway. Precisely as he’d hoped.

“To look into your eyes, Lucan,” Cian said softly, “and see death there. And I saw it.”

He turned sharply again, heading for the castle. He looked up at the entrance. “Go back inside the castle, Jessica. *Now*,” he called sharply, seeing her on the stairs.

“What does *she* think of all this, Keltar?” Lucan called after him, making his voice loud enough to carry clearly to her ears, as well. “Is she as eager for vengeance as you?”

Cian made no reply.

“Tell me, is she as ready for you to die as you are, Highlander?” Lucan called.

Cian broke into a sprint toward the stairs.

“I don’t believe you want to die, Keltar,” Lucan yelled after him. “I know I don’t. In fact, I’d do virtually anything to stay alive. I think I’d agree to anything at all to pass that tithe through the Dark Glass at midnight on Samhain.” His voice rang out, carrying clearly across the lawn, echoing off the stone walls of the castle.

Cian reached the stairs and loped up them. Turning Jessica by her shoulders, he steered her back in the castle and closed the door behind them.

Lucan didn’t care. He’d accomplished what he’d come for. His final words had not been meant for the Keltar at all. They’d been meant for the woman who’d stood on the steps so foolishly betraying her emotions, her hands anxiously fisted, her eyes deep with grief.

It would take time. He had no doubt it would take more days than he would bear well, and others would die, victims of his displeasure, in the interim. Though he could not read her, in fact, had smashed up against that strange smooth barrier once again, he'd read her body. There was no greater fool than a woman in love.

"Think on that, Jessica St. James," he whispered. "And let it begin to eat away inside you."

Many hours later, long after Lucan Trevayne had gotten back in his sleek black-windowed, black limousine and gone, Jessi sat staring at the computer screen in the darkened library.

She pressed her palms to the cool surface of the small library table beneath the softly illuminated portrait of an eighteenth-century MacKeltar patriarch and his wife, keeping her hands well away from the keyboard and the mouse.

It was four o'clock in the morning and the castle was silent as a tomb. It had begun to feel like one to her too.

She hadn't been the only one affected by the dark sorcerer's visit earlier in the day. It had cast a somber pall over all the MacKeltars.

Cian alone had been grimly satisfied by it. *He comes begging. He knows I've won, he'd told her.*

Won, her ass. Dying was not winning. Not in her book.

Lucan Trevayne was evil. He was the one who should die. Not Cian.

She raked a hand through her curls, staring at the display. Lucan Trevayne was, in fact, utterly terrifying. She'd had no idea what to expect of Cian's ancient enemy, but even if he'd warned her, nothing could have prepared her for what she'd seen.

He hadn't even looked human. The plate in her head that shielded her from compulsion and deep-listening indeed shielded her from all magic, for, while Gwen and Chloe had seen nothing more than a handsome man in his forties, Jessi'd seen the dark sorcerer's true appearance.

He'd been so heavily tattooed that his skin had appeared rotted in places. He'd

moved with sickening reptilian stealth. His eyes, if they could be called that, had been fiery crimson slits. His tongue had flickered blackly as he'd spoken.

But far worse than his grotesque appearance had been the chill and suffocating sense of pure evil that had emanated from him, even from so far across the lawn.

Not so far that she hadn't been able to clearly hear every word he'd said.

She'd tried to stay in the castle as Cian had ordered.

But when they'd gone toe to toe, when she'd seen her man facing off with that twisted . . . thing . . . out there on the lawn, she'd burst from the castle, unable to stop herself.

Her every instinct had demanded she do something—anything—to help Cian, though she'd known there was nothing she could hope to do. Not against something like Trevayne. At that moment, she'd understood much of Cian's conviction. It wasn't just horrific evil that rolled off the ancient sorcerer, it was horrific power too. Not nearly as great as Cian's, but now that she'd seen him with her own eyes, she had to concede the possibility that once Trevayne had the aid of the Dark Book, he might genuinely be unstoppable.

I think I'd agree to anything at all to pass that tithe through the Dark Glass at midnight on Samhain, the sorcerer had said.

Jessi wasn't stupid.

She knew he'd been baiting her.

Problem was, he had the right stuff on his hook.

Cian's life.

She buried her face in her hands, massaging her temples. The instant he'd said it, some terrible, weak-willed part of her had wondered how she could possibly contact him, if she wanted to.

The answer had come swiftly: E-mail. Of course. Myrddin@Drui.com. She'd had the means to contact him all along.

After a moment, she raised her head and returned her gaze to the display.

Her laptop battery was dead and she had no adaptor, so she'd waited until she was certain the castle was asleep before leaving her makeshift bed on the landing, winding down the echoing stone corridors, and booting up one of the three computers in the Keltar library.

She had over a hundred new E-mails.

Forty-two of them were from Lucan Trevayne. He'd been trying at periodic intervals to reach her again since that night in the hotel. His earlier efforts had no subject line. The more recent E-mails were captioned with blatant taunts: *Do you love him, Jessica? Are you ready to watch your Highlander die? You can save him. Would he let you die? Would he give up on your life? Buy time, Jessica, live to fight another day.*

Such a juvenile ploy. And so damned effective.

All she had to do was open an E-mail to open communications. She had no doubt that back at his residence in London—or perhaps no more than a few miles down the road, somewhere between the castle and Inverness—Lucan was monitoring a computer, waiting for the moment she did so.

Waiting for a mere “yes” to keep Cian alive.

At what cost?

Her stomach felt sick.

You can see him as he is, can't you, lass? Cian had asked, as he'd steered her back into the castle.

She'd nodded, tears threatening, for she'd known exactly where he was going.

I am the only one who can stop him, Jessica.

Yup, right where she'd thought he was going.

I am all that stands between that monster and that monster gaining unlimited power.

I don't need a crash course in ethics, Cian, she'd snapped. She'd instantly regretted her tone and words.

They had so little time left. She'd sworn to herself that she would not make a moment of it ugly, that she would not vent her rage and frustration and grief on him. That she would save her ugliness for later, when she'd already lost all she had to lose.

That now, she would give her strong, determined, noble Highlander the only gift she had to give him: perfect days and perfect nights.

A small perfect lifetime in no time at all.

I'm sorry, she'd said softly.

Nay, lass, 'tis I who am sorry, he'd replied, drawing her into his arms. 'Twas I who should have told you from the—

Don't! She'd pressed her finger to his lips. No regrets. Don't you dare. I have none.

A lie. They were eating her alive. Regret that she'd not slept with him that first night in the hotel room, knowing what she now knew. Regret that she'd not stayed that first night in Professor Keene's office and summoned him out then, and gotten to have more time with him.

Regret that she was such a coward.

That she couldn't say "Screw the world! Let them fend for themselves against Lucan. Let somebody else save everybody's ass. Not my man. What about *me*?"

She bit her lip, hard, staring at the screen. Reached for the mouse. Pulled away. Reached again, her finger hovering above it. Even without contact, she could feel the chill.

Her choices: lose Cian by letting him die to kill Lucan, or lose Cian by betraying him, by allying with his enemy to keep him alive.

Either way, she'd lose him.

And if she kept him alive, he would surely hate her. "I can't do it," she whispered, shaking her head.

A few moments later, she powered down the computer and left the library.

As the door closed behind her, from deep in the shadows, concealed behind a velvety drape, Dageus watched the display go dark and sighed.

Earlier that day, after Lucan had gone, Jessica had cornered Dageus as he'd been hurrying—unnoticed, he'd thought—in the back entrance to the castle, in an attempt to avoid contact with Cian, as he'd been doing for several days now, unwilling to risk his powerful ancestor trying to deep-read him.

Dageus, do those ancient people, the Draghar inside you, know anything? Is there any way to save him? she'd asked, her face wan, her jade eyes dark with grief.

He'd drawn a deep breath and given her the same answer he'd given Drustan when, a few days ago, his brother had asked him the same question.

Nay, lass, he'd lied.

Memory/Day Nine: Cian and I were married today!

It wasn't anything like I used to imagine my wedding would be, and it couldn't have been more perfect.

We wrote our own vows and had a private ceremony in the estate chapel. When it was over, we scribed our names in the Keltar Bible, on thick ivory parchment edged in gold.

Jessica MacKeltar, wife of Cian MacKeltar.

Drustan, Gwen, and Chloe stood as witnesses, but Dageus wasn't feeling well, so he couldn't come.

Cian is my husband now!

We had a wedding breakfast of cake and champagne and honeymooned a long, rainy day away in a big four-poster bed before a roaring fire in a magnificent, five-hundred-year-old Scottish castle.

His vows were beautiful, so much better than mine. I know the MacKeltars thought so too, because Gwen and Chloe both caught their breath and got teary-eyed. Even Drustan seemed affected by them.

I wanted to say the same thing back to him, but Cian refused to let me. He got really funny about it. He placed his hand on my heart and mine on his—it was so romantic—and he said:

*If aught must be lost, 'twill be my honor for yours.
If one must be forsaken, 'twill be my soul for yours.
Should death come anon, 'twill my life for yours.
I am Given.*

The words gave me chills through my whole body. God, how I love the man!

Memory/Day Eight: We decided on names for our children this morning. He wants girls that look like me and I want boys that look like him, so we decided to have four, two of each.

(I'd settle for one. So, if anyone's listening up there: I'D SETTLE FOR ONE, PLEASE.)

Memory/Day Five: Damn the man—he asked me not to be there when it happens!

Jessi didn't see it coming. The conversation began innocuously enough. They were lying in bed in the Silver Chamber, Cian stretched on his back, Jessi sprawled, blissfully sated, on top of him. Her breasts were pillowed against his hard chest, her legs were parted across one of his thighs (and every time he moved the slightest bit she got a delicious residual tingle from the orgasm she'd just had), and her face was pressed into the warm hollow where his chest met his neck.

They'd been making love for hours, and had just been laughing about how they wanted to go raid the kitchen, but neither of them had the strength to move.

As their laughter died, there was one of those long moments that stretched uncomfortably. They'd been occurring more and more often of late, as there were so many things both of them were being excruciatingly careful not to say.

"What if we broke the mirror, Cian?" she blurted into the strained silence. "What would happen?"

He cupped the back of her head, threading his fingers into her curls. "The glass is but my window, or door, if you will, on the world, Jessica. The actual Unseelie prison I inhabit exists in another realm. I would be trapped inside that Unseelie place, with no way out. Then, when the tithe was not paid, both Lucan and I would die. He in your world, I in a windowless broch of stone."

She shuddered, hating that image. "If you knew that breaking the mirror was a sure way to keep Lucan from passing the tithe through, why didn't you do it before you ever came to Chicago?"

“Och, lass, prior to meeting you, I had no one to summon me out, or I might have. I attempted to persuade the thief to release me, but he thought he was going mad and crated the mirror up. After that debacle I concluded mayhap ’twould be wiser to let time and distance separate me from Lucan. Trevayne searches constantly for relics of power and has many contacts. I knew not which merchants might have ties to him and feared if I continued showing myself word might get back to him and he would succeed in reclaiming the mirror before Samhain. Then, once I’d met you I had to be able to leave the glass in order to protect you. ’Twas why I was so concerned it not be broken, so you would not be left defenseless.” He paused, then added softly, “There was also the small fact that I never wanted to live more greatly than I did the moment I saw you, lass. For over a thousand years, life had meant naught to me but vengeance. Then the moment my vengeance was at hand, life suddenly meant everything. ’Twas a bitter pill to swallow.”

Jessi was choking on the bitterness of that pill herself. As each precious day slipped by, as Drustan and Dageus continued to shake their heads and say they’d still not found a way to save him, so, too, did her grip on herself slip.

Cian might have accepted his death as a necessity, but she never would.

Each night, at some point, she ended up in the darkened library, sitting in front of the computer, her hands clenched in her lap. The past few nights she’d not even dared to turn it on.

Because each day she was weakening. Ethics? What were ethics? She wasn’t even sure she could spell the word. Wasn’t in any dictionary she knew.

“What if it was broken when you were outside it?” she pressed.

“The same. ’Tis not the mirror I’m actually reclaimed back into, but that place in the Unseelie realm. When whatever hours of my freedom I was allotted that day expired, I would be returned there again, with no way out. Again, as the tithe could no longer be paid at Samhain’s end, we would die.”

*“Oh, for God’s sake,” she cried, pulling away from him. Sitting up, she punched the mattress with a fist. “I’m surrounded by magic! The three of you are Druids. On top of that, you’re a sorcerer and Dageus was possessed by thirteen ancient, evil beings! Don’t any of you know a spell or enchantment or *something that can undo this stupid indenture?*”*

Cian shook his head. "One would think so, but nay. The Keltar were chosen to protect Seelie lore, not Unseelie. Though some of us are wont to dabble with things best left alone, we ken very little of the ways of Dark Magyck, even less about the darker half of the Tuatha Dé Danaan."

"There has to be another way, Cian!"

He sat up and grabbed her by the shoulders, his whisky gaze fierce. "Och, Christ, lass, do you think I wish to die? Doona you think if there were any other way to stop Lucan that I would seize it? I love you, woman! I would do anything to live! But the simple fact is, 'tis my very life that keeps Trevayne immortal, and nothing but my death can take that away from him. In time, he will find the Dark Book. He cannot be permitted to have that time. 'Tis not merely our lives at stake, 'tis the lives of many, 'tis the very future of your world. I can stop him now. Before long, no one will be able to."

"And you can't live with that," Jessi said, unable to keep the note of bitterness from her voice. "You have to be the hero."

He shook his head. "Nay, lass. I've never been the hero, and I'm not trying to be one now. 'Tis but that there are things a man can live with and things he can't." He took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly. "I told you I was tricked into the mirror and that much is true. But I didn't tell you that I wanted the Unseelie Dark Glass too."

Jessi went very still. "Why?" Was he finally going to tell her what happened to him so long ago?

"Lucan and I were once friends, or so I thought. I later learned he was naught but subterfuge and deceit from the beginning."

"Didn't you do that deep-listening thing to him?"

Cian nodded. "Aye, I did, for my mother cared naught for the man. But when a surface probe yielded nothing, I didn't push. I arrogantly thought myself so superior in power and lore that I didn't deem Lucan a significant threat. I couldn't have been more wrong. I didn't know that he'd sought me out deliberately to get the Dark Glass. Or that he was born a bastard, sired by an unknown Druid father on a village whore, and had been shunned all his life by other Druids. They refused to teach him, refused him entrance to their inner circle."

“What lore Lucan had managed to acquire before we met had been gained through violence and bloodshed. For years he’d been systematically capturing and torturing lesser Druids for their teachings. Even more powerful ones had begun to cede him wide berth. But he couldn’t overwhelm and take captive a Druid who knew the art of Voice, and he needed that art desperately.

“He learned of me somehow and came to Scotland, to my mountains where, isolated from so much of the world, I’d not heard of him. I learned later all of Wales, Ireland, and much of Scotland had heard tales of this Lucan ‘Merlin’ Trevayne. But not I. He befriended me. We began to exchange knowledge and lore, to push each other, to see what we could do. He told me of the Scrying Glass and, before long, he offered to help me get it if I would teach him the art of Voice first.”

“The Scrying Glass?” Jessi repeated.

“Aye.” He smiled bitterly. “Lucan lied about what it was. He said ’twas used to foretell the future in fine detail. That with it one could alter certain events before they ever happened. ’Twas an enticing power to me. Especially since I’d begun to wonder what my own life held. I’d begun to doubt there was a Keltar mate for me. After all, I was nigh a score and ten, quite old for a man to have never been wed in my century.”

“A Keltar mate?”

“ ’Tis legend that there is one true mate for each Keltar Druid, his perfect match, his other half, the one who completes him with her love. If he finds her, they can exchange the Druid binding vows and bind their souls together for all time, through whatever is to come, beyond death, unto eternity.” He paused briefly, his gaze turning inward. “If, however,” he murmured, “only one of them takes the vow, only that one will be forever bound. The other remains free to love another, if he or she so chooses.”

Jessi’s breath caught in her throat. *How does a Keltar Druid recognize his mate? Am I yours?* she wanted desperately to ask. But there was no way she was asking, because if he said no, it might just kill her. Then his last comment penetrated. “Wait a minute—do you mean that if only one of them takes the vow, that person’s heart is forever bound to another person who might never love them back, not just in this life but through all eternity?”

“Aye,” he said softly.

“But that would be awful,” she exclaimed.

He shrugged. “ ’Twould depend on the circumstances. Mayhap, one might think it a gift.” He resumed his tale briskly. “I agreed to the bargain. I taught him Voice, and we rode out one morning for a village in Ireland where the Dark Glass was being guarded in the center of a veritable fortress by a dozen holy men and a band of warriors a thousand strong.

“Trevayne had given me an ancient sleep spell to employ upon our approach. Our plan was to render the guards unconscious, ride in and take the mirror, then ride out again. I saw no reason to distrust him. He’d demonstrated the spell several times himself, and it had merely made the subject slip into a deep slumber. He’d deferred the task to me because he wasn’t strong enough to affect the entire village, and I was. I’d done my best to teach him, but he simply wasn’t good enough at Voice to compel more than a handful of people in the same room with him. Though the art of it can be taught, the power that infuses it is something a man is either born with—or not. His power lay in other areas.”

“Oh, God,” Jessi breathed. “Tell me this isn’t going where I think it is.”

He nodded, his gaze distant, far away and long ago, in ninth-century Ireland. “It caused only slumber when Lucan used it, only because he lacked the power to invoke the Spell of Death. I didn’t. Though I didn’t know it, along with all the other ‘talents’ with which I’d been born was a horrific one that appeared so rarely in our bloodline that I’d never given it any thought. I believed ’twas a sleep spell I’d worked right up until that final moment I knelt in the inner chamber beside the Dark Glass and touched the holy man who lay sprawled on the floor. I think he’d tried to break the glass rather than let it be taken, but my spell had been too potent, too quick.

“He was dead. And as I sat there, even then not fully comprehending that I’d been betrayed, not able to fathom what Lucan might be after, he wove the dark binding spell around me. He had the chant, the gold, the man to ensorcel, and I’d just spilled the blood of innocents for him.

“The next thing I knew, I was looking out at Lucan from inside the Dark Glass.

“As we left the village, he gave me a view, to ensure I saw what I’d done. With one spell, I’d killed not only those guarding the glass but the entire village of Capscorth. Men, women, and children, all dead where they’d been standing; hundreds upon hundreds of them, lying in the streets, as if a plague had ripped

through their world. I was that plague.” He closed his eyes, as if trying to shut out the terrible vision he’d seen that day.

“But you didn’t mean to,” Jessi defended. Damn Lucan! She knew Cian—somewhere inside him he bore the weight of each and every life he’d taken so long ago. “It’s not like you rode in there intending to kill anyone!”

He opened his eyes and smiled faintly. “I ken it, lass,” he said, “and in truth, I no longer hate myself for what transpired that day. There are things a man can change, and there are things a man lives with. I live with it.”

He cupped her face and gazed into her eyes. “But what I cannot live with is putting into Lucan Trevayne’s hands the kind of power that would make him unstoppable. ’Twas a village then. With the Dark Book, he could destroy entire cities, even a world. Only my death can prevent that.” He paused. “Sweet Jessica, you must cry peace with this, as must I. I have no choice.”

“I can’t,” she cried, shaking her head, blinking back tears. “You can’t expect me to.”

“Lass, you must promise me something,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “I’ve been thinking much on this. I doona want you there when the time comes.”

Jessi felt as if she’d been punched in the stomach. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She’d deliberately refused to let herself think that far ahead, to let her mind linger over the details of the night it would actually happen. To the night she would stand before a mirror and watch her Highlander age more than a thousand years in a single moment.

And disintegrate into a pile of dust.

“We’ll spend what time I can be free together that day, then you will go elsewhere with the others. Promise me this,” he pushed. “Drustan has pledged to break the mirror once it’s done, so none can ever be taken captive again.”

“That’s not fair, Cian, you can’t—”

“I can, and am. ’Tis a dying man’s last request,” he said roughly. “I want you to remember me as a man, lass, as your man. Not as a prisoner of Dark Magycks. I doona want you to watch me die. Promise me you won’t, Jessica. Promise me and mean it.”

Jessi was no longer able to hold the tears at bay. Hot and wet, they scalded her cheeks.

As she stared at him through the tears, a lifetime of hopes and dreams, of wishes and desires, of love and family and children she would never get to have, flashed before her mind's eye.

It was too much.

When she spoke again, her voice was low and fervent. "I promise you, Cian MacKeltar, that I will not watch you die."

When he drew her into his arms to kiss her, she closed her eyes and counted her blessings for the privacy of a steel-plated mind.

For, though she'd pledged him the promise he'd sought, she'd not meant what he'd meant by it at all.

SAMHAIN

TWENTY-NINE MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

“That’s it, Jessica. The wards are down. You ken what that means?”

Taking a slow, deep breath, Jessi nodded. “Yes,” she replied softly. “Lucan will be able to enter the castle now, but he won’t be able to use sorcery.”

“Doona make the mistake of thinking you’re safe from him, lass. He can still harm you in the way of any man. I want you to wear this.”

He fastened a sheath snugly to her forearm, then slipped a plain-handled dirk into it, tip to her elbow, handle at her wrist. “Don your sweater over it.”

She obeyed tensely.

“Do this.” He made a twisting motion with his hand. “Drop it down.”

She mimicked his movement, surprised by how well it worked, smoothly guiding the handle into her palm.

He helped her resheathe it. “He’s desperate, Jessica. ’Tis the only reason he’s agreed to this. Doona think he’s truly agreed to it. Expect deceit. Expect last-minute treachery. *It will come.*”

She glanced up at him sharply. There’d been a strange certainty in his voice when he’d said the last: It will come. As if he knew something she didn’t.

“But you said yesterday that you thought he would pass the tithe through the glass and go away,” she protested anxiously. “You said you thought he’d focus on finding the Dark Book before he would come back and try to take the mirror from the Keltar. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? To buy a little more time. Right?”

He stared down at her a long, pensive moment. "I'm but advising you to be on constant guard, lass. Constant," he repeated. "Watch yourself. Doona let your defenses down for even a second. You've no way of knowing what might happen from one moment to the next. Remember that. Be prepared for anything. *Anything.*"

"You're starting to worry me. What do you think—"

"Hush, lass," he cut her off. "I must go. Time is short and we doona wish him to see me. He believes you act alone. He must continue to believe that. But doona fear, I will be watching over you."

Halfway down the corridor, he turned back. "*Constant guard, lass,*" he hissed.

Jessi swallowed. She tensed her wrist, feeling the weight of the blade. "Constant guard, Dageus," she echoed. "I promise."

Twenty minutes to midnight.

Jessi shivered as she hurried down the corridor. Five days ago, when she'd promised Cian that she wouldn't watch him die, she'd possessed great determination but little hope.

Later that night, however, her circumstances had changed drastically.

After the mirror had reclaimed Cian, she'd left the Silver Chamber and hastened to the library to open communications with Lucan. She'd been sitting at the computer, her inbox open, about to click on one of his E-mails, when Dageus had stepped from behind the drapes, catching her in the act. He'd told her he'd been in the library a few nights ago, and knew she'd been receiving E-mails from Trevayne.

As she'd gaped up at him, half expecting to be dragged off to some medieval dungeon for punishment, he'd further shocked her by saying, How bad do you want him to live, lass?

Figuring she had nothing left to lose at that point, she'd told him, in no uncertain terms. I'd do anything. Even make him hate me.

He won't hate you, lass, Dageus had assured her. If aught, he'll hate me.

She was counting on that. Not that he would hate Dageus, but that he would eventually forgive her for helping his enemy pass the tithe through to keep him alive.

I thought you said you didn't know of any way to free him. Why would you do this?

Why would you? he'd countered.

Because I believe there has to be a way to get him out of there, that we just need a little more time to find it.

I believe there's a way to get him out of there, too, lass, he'd replied after a brief pause.

Really? Her heart had soared at those words.

It was one thing for her to believe it; she was desperate enough to cling to any hope and she knew it. But if a Keltar Druid believed it, it was more than just possible, it was probable. No, it was an eventual certainty. There was no way Dageus and Drustan would run the risk of Trevayne ever getting the Dark Book, which meant they had to be convinced they could ultimately free Cian, and reasonably quickly after the tithe was paid.

*It had been nearly impossible to conceal her change in spirits from Cian. Especially today—on what he'd thought was their last day together—but she'd managed. Dageus had been insistent she discuss their plans with no one, even going so far as to say he wouldn't help her at all if she failed to convince Cian that she believed tonight was his last night alive. *He believes 'tis the only way, lass, Dageus had warned, I fear he will become difficult if he suspects we plan to stop him.**

Though acting the part had nearly killed her—thank God, she'd not had to actually live it!—she'd been convincing, unwilling to jeopardize her only chance to save him.

E-mail Trevayne, Dageus had instructed her that night. Tell him you'll help him get in the castle to pass the tithe through. But the Keltar keep the mirror.

She'd done it. At first Trevayne had refused, offering myriad alternatives, all of which she'd rejected at Dageus's behest.

But late last night, twenty-four hours from the zero-hour to the minute, Trevayne had finally agreed.

And now—Jessi paused at the back door, inhaling sharply—he was here. Making her skin crawl. She could feel him through the wood of the door, cold, dark, rotten, and much, much too close for comfort.

And about to get closer.

He'd accepted her deal only when she'd pledged herself as his hostage.

You must let me use you to get in and out of the castle.

Eyes wide, she'd stared up at Dageus. Nostrils flaring, he'd shaken his head curtly. But the dark sorcerer had refused to come onto Keltar-warded land any other way, and Dageus had finally nodded.

How do I know this isn't a trap? Trevayne had typed.

How do I? she'd countered.

There'd not been much to say after that. It had been the bottom line, really. They were both risking all. And they knew it.

She glanced at her watch.

It was eighteen minutes to midnight.

Dageus had been adamant they give Trevayne barely enough time to get to the mirror and pass the tithe through. I doona want him to have a single moment with you during which he doesn't have to keep moving. Once it's over, I'll show myself and we'll get him out of the castle.

It was now or never.

She braced herself for Trevayne's hideous appearance.

Whatever happened from this moment forth, she would betray no fear; no weakness. She was Jessica MacKeltar, wife of Cian, and she would do him proud.

The bastard she was about to let in Castle Keltar had held her husband imprisoned for eleven hundred and thirty-three years and, though she'd never

thought herself a violent person, she'd plunge her concealed dagger into Trevayne's heart in an instant if she thought she had a snowball's chance in hell of killing him.

She slid the deadbolt back and turned the doorknob.

"Lucan," she said coolly, inclining her head.

"Good evening, Jessica," Trevayne replied with a cordial smile. Sort of.

When he took her arm, Jessi barely suppressed her revulsion.

Dageus stood in the shadows of the corridor off the balustrade that overlooked the great hall, listening intently. Upon leaving Jessica, he'd loped up the back stairs, taking turn after turn, wending a circuitous route to his current position, all to avoid passing Cian's mirror.

His brother, Gwen, and Chloe were safely ensconced in a chamber two corridors down. Until a few hours ago, he'd had to conceal his plans from even them so none could inadvertently betray it to Cian by thinking about it in their powerful ancestor's presence.

'Tis too dangerous, Drustan had growled.

'Tis the only way, brother, he'd replied.

The Draghar knew this for a certainty?

Aye.

Too many things could go awry, Dageus. You have no way of controlling what happens.

Dageus hadn't bothered arguing. It was a long shot and he knew it. He was doing little more than setting the stage, and hoping his instincts about the actors involved would prove true.

Drustan had been reluctant to agree, until Dageus had assured him that no matter what happened, Trevayne would not pass the tithe through. That he would stop him himself if necessary. But not until the last possible second, he'd added in the

privacy of his mind.

A few dozen yards away, mounted on the wall of the landing, high above the great hall hung the Unseelie Dark Glass.

It was flat silver.

He imagined his ancestor inside it. Was Cian stretched out on his stone floor, arms behind his head, staring up at the stone ceiling, waiting for death?

If so, he knew the mere waiting was killing his ancestor a thousand times over. 'Twasn't in a Keltar's blood to accept death. Especially not once he'd found his mate and given the binding vows. Dageus knew. He'd been in far too similar a position himself.

Indeed, it was the similarity in their positions that had given him this idea to begin with.

He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes to midnight.

Expect deceit, he'd told Jessica. Expect last-minute treachery. It will come.

What he'd not told her was that 'twould come not from Lucan but from him.

Cian had been listening to the clock in the great hall below him chime the passing hours all evening.

'Twas now but mere minutes to midnight, and he was as prepared as he would ever be to draw his final breaths. He'd conjured a perfect mental vision of Jessica's face in his mind hours ago, and he intended to die holding it there.

It was jarred slightly by the sound of approaching footsteps. She'd promised not to watch, he'd thought, stiffening.

Then he jerked ramrod straight and pushed up from the floor as another sound reached his disbelieving ears.

The hated sound of Lucan Trevayne's laughter.

Nay! 'Twas not possible! There was no way the bastard could get inside Castle Keltar! Not without someone helping—

“Och, Christ, nay, lass,” he whispered. “Tell me you wouldn’t. Tell me you didn’t.”

But he didn’t need to seek visual confirmation of what he’d just heard to know she had. And the truth was, he couldn’t blame her. He’d not have let her die, either. He’d have moved mountains. He’d have battled God or Devil for his wife’s life.

She’d betrayed him.

He smiled faintly.

And in so doing, she’d honored him beyond measure. His Jessica loved him enough to break all the rules for him, enough to damn the whole world just to save him.

He’d have done no less for her. He’d have kept her alive by any means possible.

“Highlander,” Trevayne’s voice rang out triumphantly in the great hall, “you’re mine for another century.”

His smile faded. Unfortunately, her actions changed nothing. “Over my dead body,” he murmured. Which, as he’d always known, was the only way.

Jessi gazed up at the landing, high above the hall where, for the past two weeks, she’d slept every night unless Cian had been free to sleep in a bed with her.

Framed in the mirror, he stared down at her as she stood arm in arm with his enemy. He closed his eyes briefly, as if trying to cleanse the image from his vision. Then he said softly, “Call me out, lass. You doona wish to do this. You must let me stop him.”

Jessi glanced at the tall grandfather clock in the alcove to the left of the staircase. Five minutes to midnight.

Biting her lip, she shook her head.

“Jessica, you’re not just keeping me alive, you’re letting him live. We’ve been through this. You must summon me out.”

Spine straight with resolve, she shook her head again.

When the mirror blazed brilliantly and the hall was suddenly skewed by that odd sense of spatial distortion, for a moment Jessi simply couldn’t make sense of it.

Then Dageus stepped from the shadows behind the balustrade and she realized he must have murmured the chant to release Cian—the chant she herself had told him that first night in the library—softly enough that only Cian had been able to hear.

But why?

“Dageus—what are you—why did you—*oh!*” *she cried. He was moving protectively toward the Dark Glass, making his intentions all too clear.*

She was too stunned by Dageus’s betrayal to register the danger she was in until it was too late.

Lucan dropped a silken cord over her head and had it cinched tightly around the slender column of her throat, the choke handles twisted before she even knew what he was doing.

“You son of a bitch, let her go!” Cian roared, bursting from the mirror.

Rather than releasing her, Lucan turned the choke handles just a bit.

Jessica went stiff and still. She understood the use of those handles, she was familiar with the garrote as an ancient weapon. One twist and she was dead. She didn’t dare move even the few inches necessary to try to use the dagger Dageus had given her.

Expect anything, he’d said.

Now, she thought bitterly, she knew why.

Three minutes to midnight.

Lucan had his wife hostage, a garrote about her neck.

“Get back in the mirror, Highlander. Return to it willingly and I’ll let her live. Move. Now.”

Cian stretched his senses. He should have felt it earlier, but he’d had no reason to suspect anything. Aye, the wards barring Lucan from the castle were down.

But the wards preventing Lucan from using sorcery were still up. Which meant Cian could use a spell on the bastard and Lucan wouldn’t be able to counter it.

He opened his mouth, and just as he did, Lucan hissed, “Say one word in sorcerer’s tongue and she’s dead. I won’t give you the chance to bespell me. If I hear one wrong syllable, I’ll snap her neck.”

Cian closed his mouth, a muscle working in his jaw.

“And that goes for you too,” he barked at Dageus. “Either of you start a spell and she dies. Get back in the glass, Keltar. Now. I’m coming up to pass the tithe through.”

Centuries of hatred and fury filled Cian as he stared down at the man who’d stolen his life so long ago and was now threatening his woman.

Vengeance: ’Twas what he’d lived and breathed for for so long, he’d nearly lost his own humanity.

’Til his fiery, passionate Jessica had come along.

Once he’d hungered for nothing more than to see Lucan Trevayne dead. No matter the cost. In truth, it hadn’t been so many days ago that he’d hungered for it above all else—twenty-six days ago, to be exact.

Now, staring down at his ancient enemy holding his woman captive, something inside him changed.

He no longer cared if Lucan lived or died. All that mattered was getting the bastard’s hands off his wife long enough to save her. Nothing else. Just that his woman live. That she see another dawn, be granted another day. She was his light, his truth, his highest aspiration.

Love for her filled him so completely that, in the space between one heartbeat and the next, eleven centuries of hatred and lust for vengeance were burned out of him as if they’d never been.

Trevayne was no longer his problem. Only Jessica was.

A quiet resolve, an unexpected serenity filled him, unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

"I would have bargained with the devil for you, too, lass," he said softly. "I'd have done anything too. I love you, Jessica. You are my one true mate, lass. Never forget that."

"Back in the glass, Highlander," Lucan snarled. "Or she dies. I mean it! Now!"

"You want to pass the tithe through, Lucan? Fine. Be my guest. I won't stop you."

In one smooth, fluid motion, he turned, lifted the mirror from the wall, spun about, and tossed it into the air, casting it end over end, out and over fifty-odd stairs, down to the hard marble floor below.

"Catch."

For the second time in her life, events unfolded for Jessi as if in slow motion.

With Cian's admission that she was his one true mate ringing in her ears, she watched the only thing that could keep him alive plummet to virtually certain destruction.

She knew why he'd done it. To save her. Trevayne could not both hold her and go after the mirror. Cian had forced him to choose.

Her husband knew his ancient enemy well. Of course he'd go after the mirror. Survive now, live to kill another day.

The rope slackened around her neck as Lucan released the handles and lunged forward.

She tugged the garrote from her throat and dropped it to the floor, watching, heart pounding.

If, by some miracle, Lucan managed to actually catch the man-sized looking glass, she wouldn't be surprised if the ancient mirror shattered merely from the

impact of him stopping its fall.

Eyes huge, she tipped her head back and up. Cian stood at the top of the stairs, staring down at her. Love blazed in his eyes so fiercely, so intensely, that it took her breath away.

She stared at him, drinking him in. She knew she'd never make it up the stairs in time to touch him. To hold him. To kiss him just one last time.

Lucan was almost beneath the glass.

Almost.

She caught her breath and held it. Miracles sometimes happened. Maybe he'd reach it, shove the tithe through, and they'd all live to fight another day.

Mere inches from Lucan's outstretched hands, the mirror crashed to the floor. One corner of the ornate golden frame struck marble with the sharp report of a gunshot.

The Dark Glass shattered into thousands of silvery, tinkling pieces.

To Jessi, it seemed as if the entire universe froze but for those glittering shards of silver cascading across the floor.

Her husband's life lay in those pieces.

When the clock began chiming the midnight hour, her pent breath exploded from her lungs on a soft sob.

One. Two.

She raised her gaze from the floor, stared up at Cian. The Dark Glass was broken now, beyond repair. The tithe could never be paid again. She'd lost him.

Three. Four.

Dimly she was aware of Lucan, frozen, looking all-too-humanly bewildered, standing next to the twisted frame, in the midst of the shattered glass.

Five. Six.

She felt the same. Bewildered. Disbelieving. Devastated. She'd begun the day

with so much hope, only to end it with none.

Dimly she was aware that the other MacKeltar had, at some point, joined Dageus behind the balustrade and everyone seemed rooted to the ground, transfixed by the scene before them.

Seven. Eight.

There was a silent request in her husband's eyes. She knew what it was.

She'd promised not to watch him die. To remember him as her man, not a prisoner of Dark Magycks.

Nine.

It was a promise she'd always meant to keep. Just not this way. Dear God, just not this way. "I love you, Cian," she cried.

Ten. Eleven.

Her promise kept was all she had left to give him.

Tears spilled down her cheeks when she squeezed her eyes shut.

Twelve.

It was Lucan's laughter—*after the twelfth chime*—that made her eyes snap open again.

Jessi gaped blankly at the dark sorcerer who was still, mystifyingly, standing there.

Then up to the landing beyond. Her heart lodged in her throat.

Cian was still there, too!

How could that be? The glass was shattered—it was after midnight on Samhain—and the tithe hadn't been paid.

They should both be dead!

They should be dust. Little piles of it. Why weren't they? Not that she *wanted them to be. At least not one of them.*

"Oh, God," Jessi breathed, "who cares? You're still there! Oh, God, Cian!" Inhaling sharply, she broke into a sprint for the stairs, for her beloved, living, breathing husband!

"Jessica, love, watch out!" Cian roared.

Lucan had spun around and was heading straight for her, slipping and sliding over slivers of glass.

"Blethering hell, Cian, he's mortal now," Dageus roared. "Doona kill him. We need to know where the Dark Book is!"

But his warning came too late. For both of them.

As Lucan lunged for her, she slid the blade that Dageus had given her down her sleeve, into her palm.

She raised her hands to fend him off, and the blade slid into the front of Lucan's chest at the same moment the tip of a jeweled dirk pierced through him from behind, driven straight through his heart by the force of Cian's throw.

Then she was backpedaling away from the falling sorcerer and Cian was racing down the stairs toward her and taking her in his arms, turning her away from the gruesome sight.

She heard Dageus shouting down at Lucan, "Where's the Dark Book, Trevayne? Blethering hell, tell us what you know of it!"

Lucan Trevayne whispered, "Fuck you, Keltar."

And died.

"Oh, my God, you're alive. I can't believe you're alive!" Jessi couldn't seem to stop saying. Nor could she stop touching Cian, kissing him frantically, desperate to assure herself he was really there and wasn't going to disappear, or turn to dust at any moment.

"Aye, love, I'm alive." A string of curses spilled from his lips and he scowled down at her. "You tried to barter with the devil himself for me, you crazy woman. Bloody hell, doona you *ever risk your life for mine. Ever! Do you hear me?*" Burying his hands in her dark curls, he pulled her against him, slanted his mouth over hers, and kissed her hungrily.

"You would have done the same for me," she said breathlessly when he let her breathe again. As a matter of fact, he'd said so much on the day of their wedding. Should death come anon, he'd said, *'twill be my life for yours. So what if he'd refused to let her say the same. She made identical promises in her heart. I am Given.*

"Not the point," he growled. " 'Tis what a man does for his mate."

His mate. Jessi stared up at him, a sudden, stunning realization dawning. "Oh! The wedding vows you said that day were the binding vows you told me about, weren't they? You gave me the binding vows and wouldn't let me give them back! Didn't you?" She thumped him in the chest with her palm. "You tricked me!"

"I refused to let you be bound to a dead man, lass," he said grimly. "Nor was I

willing to miss the chance to pledge my heart to you forever. Even if it meant I would have to be reborn again and again, and serve as naught but your protector from afar, while you loved another. To ken you were alive and well would have been enough.” He paused a moment. “Not that I wouldn’t have done all in my power to steal your heart from whoever the bloody bastard was,” he added in a fierce growl. “I would have.”

Tears of joy misted her eyes and she laughed aloud. Oh, yes, she could see her ferocious Highlander doing battle for her heart. He’d easily have won it in any lifetime. “But you didn’t die, so don’t try to stop me now,” she said softly, taking his hand and putting it over her heart, pressing her palm to his. Speaking with quiet reverence, she echoed the words he’d given her that day in the chapel.

The moment the vow was said, the final pledge echoing in the stone hall, emotion crashed over her so intensely, her knees buckled. Love for him filled every ounce of her being. It was the most incredible sensation she’d ever felt. They were inextricably linked now, for all eternity. Cian caught her and crushed his mouth to hers, kissing her passionately. She clung to him, savoring the strength of his hard, powerful body against hers, the raw, carnal heat of his kiss.

“But wait a minute,” she said, frowning up at him a few minutes later, “how are you still alive? I don’t get it. What just happened?”

It was Dageus who replied. While she and Cian had been otherwise occupied, he and the other MacKeltars had hurried down the stairs and joined them in the great hall.

Now he guided them all away from the fallen sorcerer and the three couples moved to stand near one of the hearths.

“I didn’t quite tell you the truth, lass,” he said. “The truth was, we could find no way to free him. Our only hope lay in trying to void the Unseelie Indenture. The Draghar believed that, much as a Seelie Compact can be voided by an evil deed, an Unseelie Compact could be voided by a selfless act. Not broken, breached, nor violated. Voided. Both parties released from the binding and returned to their normal state.”

“Believed?” Drustan exclaimed. “You told me they knew.”

“They believed it very strongly,” Dageus amended hastily, slipping an arm around his wife and drawing her close.

“Wait a minute,” Chloe protested, “wouldn’t the fact that Cian had been willing to die to stop Lucan from getting the Dark Book have counted as a selfless act?”

“Nay,” Dageus said. “A selfless act cannot be tainted by personal motive. Cian was driven for centuries by hunger for vengeance. ’Twas in his voice every time he spoke of Lucan, of dying in order to kill him.”

Cian nodded. “Aye, ’tis true. I didn’t want to die. I never wanted to die. I wanted Lucan dead, and there was only one way I could accomplish it. Though I wanted to keep him from getting the Dark Book, I hungered for revenge even more.”

“But he was ready to die for you, Jessica,” Dageus told her softly. “ ’Twas what I was wagering on. That he would die for you selflessly. At the moment he threw that mirror, there was no thought of vengeance in his heart at all. There was only the desperate, pure self-sacrifice of unconditional love. And it voided the dark indenture.”

“You had no way of knowing ’twould work,” Cian growled.

“You’re right. I didn’t. But I was once in a like position, kinsman.” Dageus gazed down at Chloe. “I thought it safe to wager on your feelings for your mate.”

“You shaved it damn close. Mere seconds!”

Dageus arched a brow at Cian’s rebuke. “ ’Twas our only hope.”

“You placed my woman in danger.”

“At least you have her,” Dageus pointed out. “Christ, doona be tripping all over yourself trying to thank me for saving you, kinsman.”

“You didn’t save him,” eternal-physicist-and-human-calculator-of-odds Gwen pointed out matter-of-factly. “Not really. You just set up the circumstances. He saved himself.”

“Bloody good thing I didn’t do this for thanks,” Dageus said dryly.

“Doona be looking to me for thanks. You put us all at risk,” said Drustan.

“I’ll thank you, Dageus,” Jessi said fervently. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. I’ll thank you a hundred times a day for the rest of your life if you want me to,

and I'm sorry I hated you there for a minute when I'd thought you'd betrayed me."

Dageus nodded. "You're welcome, lass. Though you might have kept the hating me part to yourself."

Chloe beamed up at her husband. "I'll thank you too. I think you did a brilliant job of setting up circumstances, Dageus."

He dropped a kiss on her nose. Chloe was his greatest fan, as he was hers, and would always be.

"Speaking of setting up circumstances," Drustan said slowly, "I've had the oddest feeling since the two of you arrived at Castle Keltar. Verily, I've felt it a few times prior to your arrival too. Almost as if—nay, 'tis foolish." He shook his head.

"What, brother?" Dageus asked.

Drustan rubbed his jaw, frowning. "'Tis probably naught. But I've been suffering the strangest feeling that there's more going on around Castle Keltar of late than meets the eye. Has no one else been feeling this?"

"I can't speak for Castle Keltar, Drustan, but I think I know what you mean," Jessi said. "I've felt it a few times lately too. There's been this word on the tip of my tongue since this all began. I keep getting close to it, but it's the darnedest thing—just when I think I have it, it melts away."

Her brow furrowed and she was silent a long moment. Then "Aha! I think I've got it!" she exclaimed. "Is this what you mean? Synchro—"

"—nicity," Queen Aoibheal of the Tuatha Dé Danaan murmured, her iridescent eyes shimmering.

A collision of possibles so incalculably improbable that it would appear to imply divine intervention.

The corners of her lips lifted in a faint smile. She smoothed them. She'd been employing a mortal form so much of late that she was beginning to mimic their expressions.

Humans were forever attributing the meddling of the Fae to the divine. As well they should, for handling so many threads, subtly altering the weft and weck of the world, truly required something of the divine.

They were here now.

Her players, her pieces on the board. More than pawns, less than kings.

The catastrophe that had occurred in the seventeenth century hadn't taken place after all, not since she'd rearranged events to get the Keltar's underground chamber sealed. The one in the twentieth century hadn't come to fruition either, for the same reason. Nor had the other two, though for different reasons.

"J'adoube," she whispered. I touch. I adjust.

Seven times now she'd prevented the extinction of the purest and most potent of the Druid lines.

And positioned the five most powerful Druids that had ever lived precisely where she wanted them. Where they could ally her.

Where they could save her.

There was Dageus, possessing far more knowledge than any one Druid should have: all the knowledge of the Draghar, the thirteen ancients. The memories she'd left in him were doing things to him he wasn't admitting. Not to Drustan, not to his mate.

There was Cian, possessing far more power than any one Druid should have: the genetic fluke, the unexpected mutation born once in a bloodline. The things Dageus and Cian could do together if they put their minds to it worried even her.

Then there was Drustan: compared to his dangerously endowed kin, modest of power, modest of knowledge, yet superior in a way they could never be. Dageus and Cian could go either way, good or evil. Drustan MacKeltar was that unique kind of man whose name lived forever in legends of men—a warrior so pure of heart that he was beyond corrupting. A man who would die for his beliefs, not just once but ten thousand times over if necessary.

As for her other two chosen, she would be seeing them soon.

Below her, in Castle Keltar's great hall, the humans stood talking, oblivious to

her presence. Blissfully unaware that a little over five years in their future, their world was in chaos, the walls between Man and Faery were down, and the Unseelie ruled with an icy, brutal hand. The Shades were feeding again, the Hunters were enforcing compliance, calling death sentences for the slightest infraction, and the exquisite Unseelie Princes were indulging their insatiable appetite for mortal women, brutally raping, leaving mindless shells.

And she?

Ah, that was the problem.

Her gaze shifted inward from the tableau below.

Though her race could move at will through the past, they could not penetrate a future that had not yet occurred. If one attempted to go forward beyond one's present existence, one encountered an oppressive white mist, nothing more. If one went too far back in the past, one encountered the same mist. Not even the Tuatha Dé Danaan understood time. They knew how to traverse only the simplest facet of it.

She'd sifted back countless times now, from five and a half years in Earth's future—her present—delicately altering events while trying not to change too much. Concealing from all, even those of her own court, that she was temporally displaced while doing it. Worlds were fragile; one could destroy an entire planet inadvertently. She already carried the weight of such an error. It was a heavy burden. As did her long-ago consort, though the unfathomably ancient Dark King cared nothing about the blood of billions.

She'd been alive for over sixty thousand years. Many of her kind wearied of existence long before that.

Not she. She had no wish to cease. Though the loss of Adam Black to his mortal mate grieved her, and she'd considered undoing that as well, she'd learned that there was a human element that was highly dangerous to meddle with. Love's power was violently unpredictable; it affected events in ways her Tuatha Dé mind had failed to anticipate on more than one occasion.

She could not hope to predict what she could not understand. There were times when she suspected human love harbored a power more elemental and greater than any her race possessed. It infused things with strength in impossible excess of the sum of its parts. Indeed, it had been the matching of each Keltar below

with his mate that had tempered them, given them cores of steel, and made her Druids into allies worthy of a queen.

The room below fell into a sudden hush. The silence drew her gaze back to the small group of men and women.

Dageus, Chloe, Drustan, Gwen, and Jessica were all staring at Cian, who had a startled expression on his face and was gazing directly up at her, where she stood beyond the balustrade.

She stiffened. Impossible! She wasn't even truly there, but a projection of herself, concealed by countless layers of illusion, beyond an impenetrable Fae veil. Not even the most adept of Sidhe-seers would be able to isolate her formless form within the dimensional deception she'd created!

Ah, yes, this Druid had power beyond any other.

"What is it, Cian?" Drustan said, glancing over his shoulder in the direction Cian was looking. "Is aught amiss? Do you see something, kinsman?"

Aoibheal stared at the Highlander, her lips tightening. She smoothed them again. Waited for him to betray her presence.

No, no, no, it was not time yet—it could too drastically alter things—it could destroy what chance they had!

She'd attained a tenuous balance of possibles at best. She needed more time.

She held his gaze, used her human eyes to convey a mute plea. Say nothing, Keltar-mine.

The ninth-century Highlander regarded her silently. After a moment he inclined his head in the barest nod, then turned and glanced at Drustan.

"Nay," he said. "'Tis nothing, Drustan. Nothing at all."

Dear Reader:

Though the MacKeltars tried to persuade Cian and Jessi to remain at Castle Keltar, Cian had had enough of stone walls surrounding him, and hungered for the great wide-open.

With the aid of her contacts at the Manhattan museum at which she used to work, Chloe arranged the sale of Cian's ninth-century, jewel-encrusted wrist cuffs and *skean dubh*, making Cian a wealthy man.

After a quick trip back to the States—where Lilly St. James bestowed her ecstatic blessing upon them and insisted upon a second wedding attended by the entire extended St. James clan—Cian and Jessi set off to tour the British Isles, so he could see the future he'd missed, and she could indulge her passion for the study of the past.

Cian used his unique “talents” to clear his wife of all blame in the matter of the missing mirror and attendant events, and Jessi plans to one day finish her PhD, but right now she's too busy living life to worry about planning it.

The two of them were last seen, a little bit tipsy and a whole lot in love, dancing slow and sweet to an old Scots ballad, in a tiny pub in the northern Highlands of Scotland.

On a different note, a great many of you have written to ask whether there will be more Keltar and Fae stories in the future.

Yes. More of both are in the works. I have no intention of ending the Highlander series for some time to come.

Thanks to all of you for loving these Keltar Druids as much as I do.

All my best, and happy reading!

Karen

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To Tame a Highland Warrior

The Highlander's Touch

Kiss of the Highlander

The Dark Highlander

The Immortal Highlander

SPELL OF THE HIGHLANDER

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Into the Dreaming

Karen Marie Moning

For my sister Laura, whose talent for shaping unformed clay extends to far more than that which can be fired in a kiln.

May your gardens ever bloom in lush profusion,

May your peach jam and pecan chicken always taste like heaven,

May the artistry inside your soul always find expression,

And may you always know how loved you are.

His hard, wet body glistened in the moonlight as he emerged from the ocean. Brilliant eyes of stormy aquamarine met hers, and her heart raced.

He stood naked before her, the look in his eyes offering everything, promising eternity.

When he cupped one strong hand at the nape of her neck and drew her closer to receive his kiss, her lips parted on a sigh of dreamy anticipation.

His kiss was at first gentle, then as stormy as the man himself, for he was a man of deep secrets, a man of deeper passion, her Highlander.

One hand became two buried in her hair, one kiss became a second of fierce and fiery desire, then he swept her into his arms, raced up the castle steps, and carried her to his bedchamber...

Excerpted from the unpublished manuscript *Highland Fire*
by Jane Sillee

One

928

Not quite Scotland

It was a land of shadows and ice.

Of gray. And grayer. And black.

Deep in the shadows lurked inhuman creatures, twisted of limb and hideous of countenance. Things one did well to avoid seeing.

Should the creatures enter the pale bars of what passed for light in the terrible place, they would die, painfully and slowly. As would he—the mortal Highlander imprisoned within columns of sickly light—should he succeed in breaking the chains that held him and seek escape through those terrifying shadows.

Jagged cliffs of ice towered above him. A frigid wind shrieked through dark labyrinthine canyons, bearing a susurrus of desolate voices and faint, hellish screams. No sun, no fair breeze of Scotland, no scent of heather penetrated his frozen, bleak hell.

He hated it. His very soul cringed at the horror of the place. He ached for the warmth of the sun on his face and hungered for the sweet crush of grass beneath his boots. He would have given years of his life for the surety of his stallion between his thighs and the solid weight of his claymore in his grip.

He dreamed—when he managed to escape the agony of his surroundings by retreating deep into his mind—of the blaze of a peat fire, scattered with sheaves of heather. Of a woman's warm, loving caresses. Of buttery, golden-cruled bread hot from the hearth. Simple things. Impossible things.

For the son of a Highland chieftain, who'd passed a score and ten in resplendent mountains and vales, five years was an intolerable sentence; an incarceration that would be withstood only by force of will, by careful nurturing of the light of hope within his heart.

But he was a strong man, with the royal blood of Scottish kings running hot and true in his veins. He would survive. He would return and reclaim his rightful place, woo and win a bonny lass with a tender heart and a tempestuous spirit like his mother, and fill the halls of Dun Haakon with the music of wee ones.

With such dreams, he withstood five years in the hellish wasteland.

Only to discover the dark king had deceived him.

His sentence had never been five years at all, but five *fairy* years: five hundred years in the land of shadow and ice.

On that day when his heart turned to ice within his breast, on that day when a single tear froze upon his cheek, on that day when he was denied even the simple solace of dreaming, he came to find his prison a place of beauty.

"My queen, the Unseelie king holds a mortal captive."

The Seelie queen's face remained impassive, lest her court see how deeply disturbing she found the messenger's news.

Long had the Seelie Court of Light and the Unseelie Court of Dark battled. Long had the Unseelie king provoked her. "Who is this mortal?" she asked coolly.

"Aedan MacKinnon, son and heir of the Norse princess Saucy Mary and Findanus MacKinnon, from Dun Haakon on the Isle of Skye."

"Descendent of the Scottish king, Kenneth McAlpin," the queen mused aloud. "The Unseelie king grows greedy, his aim lofty, if he seeks to turn the seed of the McAlpin to his dark ways. What bargain did he strike with this mortal?"

"He sent his current Hand of Vengeance into the world to bring death to the mortal's clansmen yet bartered that if the mortal willingly consented to spend five years in his kingdom, he would spare his kin."

"And the MacKinnon agreed?"

"The king concealed from him that five years in Faery is five centuries. Still, as grandseed of the McAlpin, I suspect the MacKinnon would have accepted the full term to protect his clan."

"What concession does the king make?" the queen asked shrewdly. Any bargain between fairy and mortal must hold the possibility for the human to regain his freedom. Still, no mortal had ever bested a fairy in such a bargain.

"At the end of his sentence, he will be granted one full cycle of the moon in the mortal world, at his home at Dun Haakon. If, by the end of that time, he is loved and loves in return, he will be free. If not, he serves as the king's new Hand of Vengeance until the king chooses to replace him, at which

time he dies."

The queen made a sound curiously like a sigh. By such cruel methods had the Unseelie king long fashioned his deadly, prized assassin—his beloved Vengeance—by capturing a mortal, driving him past human limits into madness, indurating him to all emotion, then endowing him with special powers and arts.

Since the Unseelie king was barred entrance to the human world, he trained his Vengeance to carry out his orders, to hold no act too heinous. Mortals dared not even whisper the icy assassin's name, lest they inadvertently draw his merciless attention. If a man angered the Unseelie king, Vengeance punished the mortal's clan, sparing no innocents. If grumblings about the fairy were heard, Vengeance silenced them in cruelly imaginative ways. If the royal house was not amenable to the fairy world, Vengeance toppled kings as carelessly as one might sweep a chessboard.

Until now, it had been the Unseelie king's wont to abduct an insignificant mortal, one without clan who would not be missed, to train as his Vengeance. He went too far this time, the Seelie queen brooded, abducting a blood grandson of one of fair Scotia's greatest kings—a man of great honor, noble and true of heart.

She would win this mortal back.

The queen was silent for a time. Then, "Ah, what five hundred years in that place will do to him," she breathed in a chill voice. The Unseelie king had named the terms of his bargain well. Aedan MacKinnon would still be mortal at the end of his captivity but no longer remotely human when released. Once, long ago and never forgotten, she'd traversed

that forbidden land herself, danced upon a pinnacle of black ice, slept within the dark king's velvet embrace...

"Perhaps an enchanted tapestry," she mused, "to bring the MacKinnon the one true mate to his heart." She could not fight the Unseelie king directly, lest the clash of their magic too gravely damage the land. But she could and would do all in her power to ensure Aedan MacKinnon found love at the end of his imprisonment.

"My queen," the messenger offered hesitantly, "they shall have but one bridge of the moon in the sky. Perhaps they should meet in the Dreaming."

The queen pondered a moment. The Dreaming: that elusive, much-sought, everforgotten realm where mortals occasionally brushed pale shoulder to iridescent wing with the fairy. That place where mortals would be astonished to know battles were won and lost, universes born, and true love preordained, from Cleopatra and Marc Antony to Abelard and Heloise. The lovers could meet in the Dreaming and share a lifetime of loving before they ever met in the mortal realm. It would lay a grand foundation for success of her plan.

"Wisely spoken," the queen agreed. Rising from her floral bower with fluid grace, she raised her arms and began to sing.

From her melody a tapestry was woven, of fairy lore, of bits of blood and bone, of silken hair from the great, great-grandson of the McAlpin, of ancient rites known only to the True Race. As she sang, her court chanted:

*Into the Dreaming lure them deep
where they shall love whilst they doth
sleep
then in the waking both shall dwell
'til love's fire doth melt his ice-borne
hell.*

And when the tapestry was complete, the queen marveled.

"Is this truly the likeness of Aedan MacKinnon?" she asked, eyeing the tapestry with unmistakable erotic interest.

"I have seen him, and it is so," the messenger replied, wetting his lips, his gaze fixed upon the tapestry.

"Fortunate woman," the queen said silkily.

The fairy queen went to him in the Dreaming, well into his sentence, when he was quite mad. Tracing a curved nail against his icy jaw, she whispered in his ear, "Hold fast, MacKinnon, for I have found you the mate to your soul. She will warm you. She will love you above all others."

The monster chained to the ice threw back his dark head and laughed.

It was not a human sound at all.

Two

Present day

Oldenburg, Indiana

Jane Sillee had an intensely passionate relationship with her postman.

It was classic love-hate.

The moment she heard him whistling his way down her walk, her heart kicked into overtime, a sappy smile curved her lips, and her breathing quickened.

But the moment he failed to deliver the acceptance letter extolling the wonders of her manuscript, or worse, handed her a rejection letter, she hated him. *Hated* him. Knew it was his fault somehow. That maybe, just maybe, a publisher had written glowing things about her, he'd dropped the letter because he was careless, the wind had picked it up and carried it off, and even now her bright and shining future lay sodden and decomposing in a mud puddle somewhere.

Just how much could a federal employee be trusted, anyway? she brooded suspiciously. He could be part of some covert study designed to determine how much one tortured writer could endure before snapping and turning into a pen-wielding felon.

"Purple prose, my ass," she muttered, balling up the latest rejection letter. "I only used black ink. I can't *afford* a color ink cartridge." She kicked the door of her tiny apartment shut and slumped into her secondhand nagahide recliner.

Massaging her temples, she scowled. She simply had to get this story published. She'd become convinced it was the only way she was ever going to get him out of her mind.

Him. Her sexy, dark-haired Highlander. The one who came to her in dreams.

She was hopelessly and utterly in love with him.

And at twenty-four, she was really beginning to worry about herself.

Sighing, she unballled and smoothed the rejection letter. This one was the worst of the lot and got pretty darned personal, detailing numerous reasons why her work was incompetent, unacceptable, and downright idiotic. "But I *do* hear celestial music when he kisses me," Jane protested. "At least in my dreams I do," she muttered.

Crumpling it again, she flung it across the room and closed her eyes.

Last night she'd danced with him, her perfect lover.

They'd waltzed in a woodland clearing, caressed by a fragrant forest breeze, beneath a black velvet canopy of glittering stars. She'd worn a gown of shimmering lemon-colored silk. He'd worn a plaid of crimson and black atop a soft, laced, linen shirt. His gaze had been so tender, so passionate, his hands so strong and masterful, his tongue so hot and hungry and—

Jane opened her eyes, sighing gustily. How was she supposed to have a normal life when she'd been dreaming about the man since she was old enough to remember dreaming? As a child, she'd thought him her guardian angel. But as she'd ripened into a young woman, he'd become so much more.

In her dreams, they'd skipped the dance of the swords between twin fires at Beltane atop a majestic mountain while sipping honeyed mead from pewter tankards. How could a cheesy high-school prom replete with silver disco ball suspended from the ceiling accompanied by plastic cups of Hawaiian Punch compare to that?

In her dreams, he'd deftly and with aching gentleness removed her virginity. Who wanted a Monday-night-football-watching, beer-drinking, insurance adjuster/frustrated wannabe-pro-golfer?

In her dreams he'd made love to her again and again, his heated touch shattering her innocence and awakening her to every manner of sensual pleasure. And although in her waking hours, she'd endeavored to lead a normal life, to fall for a flesh-and-blood man, quite simply, no mere man could live up to her dreams.

"You're hopeless. Get over him, already," Jane muttered to herself. If she had a dollar for every time she'd told herself that, she'd own Trump Tower. And the air rights above it.

Glancing at the clock, she pushed herself up from the chair. She was due at her job at the Smiling Cobra Café in twenty minutes, and if she was late again, Laura might make good on her threat to fire her. Jane had a tendency to forget the time, immersed in her writing or research or just plain daydreaming.

You're a throwback to some other era, Jane, Laura had said a dozen times.

And indeed, Jane had always felt she'd been born in the wrong century. She didn't own a car and didn't want one. She hated loud noises, condos, and skyscrapers and loved the unspoiled countryside and cozy cottages. She suffered living in an apartment because she couldn't afford a house. Yet.

She wanted her own vegetable garden and fruit orchard. Maybe a milking cow to make butter and cheese and fresh whipped cream. She longed to have babies—three boys and three girls would do nicely.

Yes, in this day and age, she was definitely a throwback. To cave man days, probably, she thought forlornly. When her girlfriends had graduated from college and rushed off with their business degrees and briefcases to work in steel-and-glass high-rises, determined to balance career, children, and marriage, Jane had taken her BA in English and gone to work in a coffee shop, harboring simpler aspirations. All she wanted was a low-pressure job that wouldn't interfere with her writing ambitions. Jane figured the skyrocketing divorce rate had a whole lot to do with people trying to tackle too much. Being a wife, lover, best friend, and mother seemed like a pretty full plate to her. And if—no, she amended firmly—*when* she finally got published, writing romance would be a perfect at-home career. She'd have the best of both worlds.

Right, and someday my prince will come...

Shrugging off an all-too-familiar flash of depression, she wheeled her bike out of the tiny hallway between the kitchen and bedroom and grabbed a jacket and her backpack. As she opened the door she glanced back over her shoulder to be

sure she'd turned off her computer and ran smack into the large package that had been left on her doorstep.

That hadn't been there half an hour ago when she'd plucked her mail from the sweaty, untrustworthy hands of the postman. Perhaps he'd returned with it, she mused; it *was* large. It must be her recent Internet order from the online used bookstore, she decided. It was earlier than she'd anticipated, but she wasn't complaining.

She'd be blissfully immersed in larger-than-life heroes, steamy romance, and alternate universes for the next few days. Glancing at her watch again, she sighed, propped her bike against the doorjamb, dragged the box into her apartment, wheeled her bike back out into the hall, then shut and locked the door. She knew better than to open the box now. She'd quickly progress from stealing a quick glance at the covers, to opening a book, to getting completely lost in a fantasy world. And then Laura would fire her for sure.

It was nearly one in the morning by the time Jane finally got home. If she'd had to make one more extra-shot, one-half decaf, Venti, double-cup, two-Sweet-n-Low, skim with light foam latte for one more picky, anorexic bimbo, she might have done bodily harm to a customer. Why couldn't anyone drink good old-fashioned coffee anymore? Heavy on the sugar—*loads* of cream. Life was too short to count calories. At least that's what she told herself each time the scale snidely deemed her plump for five-foot, three and three-quarter inches.

With a mental shrug, she scattered thoughts of work from her mind. It was over. She'd done her time, and now she was free

to be just Jane. And she couldn't wait to start that new vampire romance she'd been dying to read!

After brushing her teeth, she slipped out of her jeans and sweater and into her favorite nightie, the frilly, romantic one with tiny daisies and cornflowers embroidered at the scooped neckline. She tugged the box near her bed before dropping cross-legged on the plump, old-fashioned feather ticks. Slicing the packing-tape seal with a metal nail file, she paused and sniffed, as an irresistibly spicy scent wafted from the box. Jasmine, sandalwood, and something else... something elusive that nudged her past feeling dreamily romantic to positively aroused. *Great time to read a romance*, she thought ruefully, *with no man to attack when the love scenes heat up*. Untouched except in her dreams, her hormones tended to simmer at a constant gentle boil.

With a wry smile, she dug past the purple Styrofoam peanuts and paused again when her hands closed on rough fabric. Frowning, she tugged it free, sending peanuts skittering across the hardwood floor. The exotic scent filled the room, and she glanced at the closed casement window, bemused by the sudden sultry breeze that lifted strands of her curly red hair and pressed her nightie close to her body.

Perplexed, she placed the folded fabric on her bed, then checked the box. No postmark, no return address, but her name was printed on the top in large block letters, next to her apartment number.

"Well, I'm not paying for it," she announced, certain a hefty bill would shortly follow. "I didn't order it." Darned if she was paying for something she didn't want. She had a hard enough time affording the things she did want.

Irritated that she had no new books to read, she plucked idly at the fabric, then unfolded it and spread it out on the bed.

And sat motionless, her mouth ajar.

"This is *not* funny," she breathed, shocked. "No," she amended in a shaky whisper, "this is not *possible*."

It was a tapestry, exquisitely woven of brilliant colors, featuring a magnificent Highland warrior standing before a medieval castle, legs spread in an arrogant stance that clearly proclaimed him master of the keep. Clad in a crimson and black tartan, adorned with clan regalia, both his hands were extended as if reaching for her.

And it was *him*. Her dream man.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes, then opened them slowly.

It was still him. Each detail precisely as she'd dreamed him, from his powerful forearms and oh-so-capable hands to his luminous aqua eyes, to his silky dark hair and his sensual mouth.

How she would have loved living in medieval times, with a man like him!

Beneath his likeness, carefully stitched, was his name. "Aedan MacKinnon," she whispered.

Mortals did not bide captivity in Faery well—they did not age and time stretched into infinity—and Aedan MacKinnon was no exception. It took a mere two hundred years of being imprisoned in ice, coupled with the king's imaginative

tortures, for the Highlander to forget who he'd once been. The king devoted the next two centuries to brutally training and conditioning him.

He educated the Highlander in every language spoken and instructed him in the skills, customs, and mores of each century so that he might move among mankind in any era without arousing suspicion. He trained him in every conceivable weapon and manner of fighting and endowed him with special gifts.

During the fifth and final century, the king dispatched him frequently to the mortal realm to dole out one punishment or another. Eradicating the mortal's confounded sense of honor had proven impossible, so the king utilized dark spells to compel his obedience during such missions, and if the conflict caused the mortal immeasurable pain, the king cared not. Only the end result interested the Unseelie king.

After five centuries, the man who'd once been known as Aedan MacKinnon had no recollection of his short span of thirty years in the mortal realm long ago. He no longer knew that he was mortal himself and did not understand why his king was banishing him there now.

But the king knew he owned his Vengeance only once he had fulfilled all the terms of the original agreement—the agreement the Highlander had long ago forgotten. In accordance with that agreement, the king was forbidden to coerce him with magic or instruction of any kind: Vengeance was to have his month at Dun Haakon, free of the king's meddling.

Still, the king could offer a few suggestions... suggestions he knew his well-trained Vengeance would construe as direct

orders. After informing Vengeance—to whom time had little meaning—that the year was 1428, refreshing his knowledge of the proper customs of the century, and giving him a weighty pouch of gold coin, the Unseelie king "suggested," choosing his words carefully:

"Your body will have needs in the mortal realm. You must eat, but I would suggest you seek only bland foods."

"As you will it, my liege," Vengeance replied.

"The village of Kyleakin is near the castle wherein you'll reside. It might be best that you go there only to procure supplies and not dally therein."

"As you will it, my liege."

"Above all else, it would be unwise to seek the company of female humans or permit them to touch you."

"As you will it, my liege." A weighty pause, then, "Must I leave you?"

"It is for but a short time, my Vengeance."

Vengeance took a final look at the land he found so beautiful.

"As you will it, my liege," he said.

Jane studied the tapestry, running her fingers over it, touching his face, wondering why she'd never thought to try to create a likeness of him before. What a joy it was to gaze upon him in her waking hours! She wondered where it had come from, why it had been delivered to her, if it meant he really existed out there somewhere. Perhaps, she decided, he'd lived long ago, and this tapestry had been his portrait,

handed down from generation to generation. It looked as if it had been lovingly cared for over the centuries.

Still, that didn't explain how or why it had been sent to *her*. She'd never told anyone about the strange recurring dreams of her Highlander. There was no logical explanation for the tapestry's arrival. Baffled, she shook her head, scattering the troubling questions from her mind, and gazed longingly at his likeness.

Funny, she mused, she'd been dreaming about him for forever, but until now she had never known his last name. He'd been only Aedan and she only Jane.

Their dream nights had been void of small talk. Theirs had been a wordless love—the quietly joyous joining of two halves of a whole. No need for questions, only for the dancing and the loving and, one day not too far off, babies. Their love transcended the need for language. The language of the heart was unmistakable.

Aedan MacKinnon. She rolled the name over and over in her mind.

She wondered and wished and ached for him, until at last, she rested her cheek against his face, curled up, and tenderly kissed his likeness. As she drifted into dreams—in that peculiar moment preceding deep sleep that always felt to Jane like falling—she thought she heard a silvery voice softly singing. The words chimed clearly, echoing in her mind:

Free him from his ice-borne hell

And in his century you both may dwell.

In the Dreaming hast thou loved him

*Now, in the Waking must thou save
him.*

And then she thought no more, swept away on a tide of
dreams.

Three

1428

Isle of Skye

When Jane awakened there was a kitten draped across her neck, napping. Paws buried in her curly hair, it kneaded and purred deliriously, its tiny body thrumming with pleasure.

She blinked, trying to wake up. Had there been a kitten in the box, too? she wondered, petting its silky belly, feeling terribly guilty for failing to notice it earlier. How had it breathed in the box? Poor thing must be starved! She thought she might have some tuna in the pantry to give the little tyke. Stretching gingerly, she lifted the tiny creature off her neck and rolled over onto her side.

And shrieked.

"L-l-lake!" she sputtered. "There's a lake in my bedroom!" Three feet away from her. Deep blue and gently lapping at the shore. The shore that she'd been sleeping on.

Stunned, she sat up, performing a frantic mental check. Bedroom, gone. Apartment, gone. Tapestry, gone. Kitten, here. Nightie—

Gone.

"I am *so* not in the mood for an inadequacy dream," Jane hissed.

Purple flowery stuff. Here. Castle. Here.

Castle?

She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. The kitten mewed and gave her an insistent head-butt, demanding more belly rubbing. She clutched the tiger-striped kitten and gaped at the castle. It looked very much like the castle she visited in her dreams, except this castle was in near ruin; a mere quarter of it stood undamaged.

"I'm still sleeping," she whispered. "I'm just dreaming that I woke up, right?" She would have been only mildly surprised had the kitten bared pearly teeth and cheekily replied.

But it didn't, so, cradling its tiny body, she rose and started walking toward the castle, wincing as her bare feet padded across stones. She tried to imagine herself some dream clothes and shoes, but it didn't work. *So much for controlling one's subconscious*, she thought. As she gazed at the portion of the castle still intact—a square central tower abutted by one wing that sported a smaller round tower—her gaze was caught by a dark flutter atop the walls. As she watched, the flutter became a shirt, the shirt a shoulder, the shoulder a man.

Her man.

She stood motionless, gazing up.

Vengeance could not fathom what had driven him to climb to

the top of the tower. He'd intended to sit in the hall of the strange castle, eating only enough to survive, gazing at nothing, waiting to return to his king, but moments ago he'd felt an overwhelming compulsion to go outside. Being outside, however, was disconcerting—no cool shadows and ice but riotous color and heat—so he'd climbed instead to the walk atop the tower, where he felt less besieged by the foreign landscape.

And there she stood—the lass.

Bare as she'd been fashioned.

Something low in his gut twisted. Mayhap the cold, hard bread he'd eaten, he decided.

Distantly, he acknowledged her beauty. Flames of curly red hair framed a delicate porcelain face, tumbled down her back, and fell in ringlets over her breasts... breasts full and high and pink-tipped.

Legs of alabaster and rose; slender of ankle, generous of thigh. More shimmering red curls where they met. For a moment, he suffered an inexplicable inability to draw his gaze higher.

But only for a moment.

She clutched a tiny kitten to her breasts, and he had another strange moment, considering the wee beastie's lush perch, assailed by a vague and distant recollection.

It eluded him.

Unseelie females were icy creatures, with thin limbs and chill bodies.

Yet this woman didn't look icy. Nor slim. But full and generously rounded and soft and... warm.

It would be unwise to seek out the company of female humans or permit them to touch you, his king had ordered.

Vengeance turned his back and left the tower walk.

Jane's mouth opened and shut a dozen times while he stood at the top of the tower gazing down at her. He'd disappeared without a word. As if he didn't even know her! As if they hadn't been dream lovers for nearly forever!

As if she wasn't even standing there in all her glory, which—if one believed the love words he'd whispered in her dreams—was considerable.

Well, Jane Sillee thought irritably, if he thinks this is a dream breakup, he's got another thought coming.

Four

It was a little difficult to convincingly stomp into a castle nude, even in a dream.

One fretted about things like cellulite and what one's bare foot might stomp upon.

So Jane succeeded only, despite her righteous ire, in slinking into the castle, looking rather uncertain and, if her nipples were a weathervane, noticeably chilled.

He was sitting before the empty hearth, staring into it. She gazed at the fireplace wistfully, longing for a fire. It might be summer outside, but it was cold within the damp stone walls. Ever chivalrous in her dreams, he would surely accommodate her slightest wish and build a fire.

It occurred to her then that she'd never been cold in one of her dreams before. She filed the thought away for future consideration. There was something very odd about this dream.

"Aedan," she said softly.

He didn't move a muscle.

"Aedan, my love," she tried again. Perhaps he was in a bad mood, she thought, perplexed, although he'd never been in a bad mood in any of her dreams before, but she supposed there was a first time for everything. Was he angry at her for something? Had she popped in after committing some dream

transgression?

He still didn't move or respond.

"Excuse me," she said not so sweetly, circling around in front of him, using the love-starved kitten as a shawl of sorts, feeling suddenly insecure, wondering what to cover, her breasts or her... Well, maybe he wouldn't look down.

He looked down.

When she lowered the mewling kitten, he looked up.

"That's not fair," she said, blushing. "Lend me your shirt." This was not unfolding like one of her dreams at all. Ordinarily, she didn't mind being nude with him because they were either making love in bed, or in a pile of freshly mown hay, or in a sweet, clear loch, or on a convenient table, but now he was fully clothed, and something was way off-kilter. "Please." She extended her hand.

When he shrugged, stood up, and began unlacing his linen shirt, her breath caught in her throat. When he raised one arm over his head, grabbed the nape of his shirt in a fist, and tugged it over his head, she swallowed hard. "Oh, *Aedan*," she breathed. Gorgeous. He was simply flawless, with supple muscles rippling in his arms, his chest, and his taut abdomen. She'd kissed every smooth ripple in her dreams. The sheer, visceral beauty of her Highlander hit her like a fist in the stomach, making her knees weak.

"I know not why you persist in addressing me by that appellation. I am Vengeance," he said, his voice like a blade against rough stone.

Jane's mouth popped open in an "O" of surprise.

"Vengeance?" she echoed blankly, round-eyed. Then, "This *is* a dream, isn't it, Aedan?" It was quite different from her usual dream. In her dreams everything was soft-focus and fuzzed around the edges, but now things were crystal clear.

A little too clear, she thought, frowning as she glanced around.

The interior of the castle was an absolute mess. Grime and soot stained the few furnishings, and cobwebs swayed from the rafters. There was no glass in the windows, no draperies, no sumptuous tapestries, no luxurious rugs. A lone rickety chair perched before a dilapidated table that tilted lopsidedly before an empty hearth. No candles, no oil globes. It was spartan, gloomy, and downright chilly.

He pondered her question a moment. "I doona know what dreams are." There was only existing as he had always known it. Shadows and ice and his king. And pain sometimes, pain beyond fathoming. He'd learned to avoid it at all cost. "But I am not who you think."

Jane inhaled sharply, hurt and bewildered. Why was he denying who he was? It was him... yet not him. She narrowed her eyes, studying him. Sleek dark fall of hair—same as in her dreams. Chiseled face and sculpted jaw—same. Brilliant eyes, the color of tropical surf—not the same. Frost seemed to glitter in their depths. His sensual lips were brushed with a hint of blueness, as if from exposure to extreme cold. Everything about him seemed chilled; indeed, he might have been carved from ice and painted flesh tones.

"Yes, you are," she said firmly. "You're Aedan MacKinnon."

An odd light flashed deep within his aquamarine eyes but

was as quickly gone. "Cease with that ridiculous name. I am Vengeance," he said, his deep voice ringing hollowly in the stone hall. He thrust his shirt at her.

Eagerly, she reached for it, intensely unsettled, needing clothing, some kind of armor to deflect his icy gaze. As her hand brushed his, he snatched his back, and the shirt dropped to the floor.

Doubly hurt, she stared at him a long moment, then stooped and placed the kitten on the floor, where it promptly twined about her ankles, purring. Fumbling in her haste, she swiftly slipped the shirt over her head and tugged it down as far as it would go. The soft fabric came nearly to her knees when she rose again. The neck opening dropped to her belly button. She laced it quickly, but it did little to cover her breasts.

His gaze seemed quite fixed there.

Taking a quick deep breath, she skirted the amorous kitten and stepped toward him.

Instantly, he raised a hand. "Stay. Doona approach me. You must leave."

"Aedan, don't you know me at all?" she asked plaintively.

"Verily, I've ne'er seen you before, human. This is my place. Begone."

Jane's eyes grew huge. "Human?" she echoed. "Begone?" she snapped. "And go where? I don't know *how* to leave. I don't know how I got here. Hell's bells, I'm not certain I really *am* here or even where here is!"

"If you won't leave, I will." He rose and left the hall, slipping

into the shadows of the adjoining wing.

Jane stared blankly at the space where he'd been.

Jane studied the lake a long moment before dipping her finger in, then licking it. The tiger-striped kitten sat back on its haunches, twitching its wide fluffy tail and watching her curiously.

Salt. It was no lake she was surrounded by, but the sea. *What sea?* What sea abutted Scotland? She'd never been good with geography; she was lucky she could find her way home every day. But then again, she mused, never before in one of her dreams had she bothered to wonder about geography—more evidence that this dream was strikingly abnormal.

Jane dropped down cross-legged on the rocky shore, shaking her head. Either she'd gone completely nuts, or she was having her first-ever nightmare about her dream lover.

As she sat, rubbing her forehead and thinking hard, the soft syllables of a rhyme teased her memory. Something about saving him... about being in his century.

Jane Sillee, you've finally done it, she chided herself, you've read one too many romance novels. Only in books did heroines get swept back in time, and then they usually ended up in medieval—*oh!*

Lurching to her feet, she spun back toward the castle and took a long, hard look at her surroundings. To the left of the castle, some half-mile in the distance, was a village of thatch-roofed, wattle, and daub huts, with tendrils of smoke curling lazily skyward.

A very medieval-looking village.

She pinched herself, hard. "Ow!" It hurt. She wondered if that proved anything. "It's not possible," she assured herself. "I *must* be dreaming."

Free him from his ice-borne hell and in his century you both may dwell. In the Dreaming hast thou loved him now, in the Waking must thou save him. The rhyme, elusive a few moments ago, now resurfaced clearly in her mind.

"Impossible," she scoffed.

But what if it isn't? a small voice in her heart queried hopefully. What if the mysterious tapestry had somehow sent her back to medieval times? Accompanied by pretty clear instructions: that if she could save him, she could stay with him. In *his* century.

What century was that?

Jane snorted and shook her head.

Still, that small voice persisted with persuasive logic, there are only three possibilities: You're dreaming. You're crazy. Or you're truly here. If you're dreaming, nothing counts, so you may as well plunge right in. If you're crazy, well, nothing counts either, so you may as well plunge right in. If you're really here, and you're supposed to save him, everything counts, so you'd better hurry up and plunge right in.

"I'm crazy," she muttered aloud. "Time-travel, my ass."

But the small voice had a point. What did she have to lose by temporarily suspending disbelief and interacting with her surroundings? Only by immersing herself in her current

situation might she be able to make any sense of it. And if it were a dream, eventually she'd wake up.

But heavens, she thought, inspecting the landscape, it all seemed so *real*. Far more real than any of her dreams had ever been. The dainty purple bell-shaped flowers exuded a sweet fragrance. The wind carried the tang of salt from the sea. When she stooped to pet the kitten, it felt soft and silky and had a wet little nose. If she was dreaming, it was the most detailed, incredible dream she'd ever had.

Which made her wonder how detailed and incredible making love with Aedan in this "dream" might be. That was incentive enough right there to plunge in.

Her stomach growled insistently, yet another dung that had never happened in one of her dreams. Resolutely, she turned back toward the castle. The kitten bounded along beside her, swiping at the occasional butterfly with gleeful little paws, then scurrying to catch up with her again.

She would keep an open mind, she resolved as she stepped inside the great hall. She would question him, find out what year it supposedly was, and where she supposedly was. Then she would try to discover why he didn't know her and why he thought he was "Vengeance."

Aedan sat again, as he had before, staring into the empty fireplace. Clad in loose black trousers, boots, and a gloriously naked upper torso, he was as still as death.

When she perched on the chilly stone hearth before him, his eyes glittered dangerously. "I thought you left," he growled.

"I told you, I don't know how to leave," she said simply.

Vengeance considered her words. Had his king deliberately placed the female human there? If so, why? Always before when his king had sent him into the mortal realm, Vengeance had been given precise instructions, a specific mission to accomplish. But not this time. He knew not what war to cause, whose ear to poison with lies, or whom to maim or kill. Mayhap, he brooded, this was his king's way of testing him, of seeing if Vengeance could determine what his king wanted of him.

He studied her. There was no denying it, he was curious about the human. She was the antithesis of all he'd encountered in his life; vibrant, with her flaming hair and curvy body. Pale porcelain skin and rosy lips. Eyes of molten amber fringed by dusky lashes and slanted upward at the outer corners. She had many facial expressions, lively muscles that pulled her lips up and down and many which ways. He found himself wondering what she would feel like, were he to touch her, if she was as soft and warm as she looked.

"Would you mind building me a fire?" she asked.

"I am not cold. Nor do you look cold," he added, his gaze raking over her. She looked far warmer than aught he'd seen.

"Well, I am. Fire. Now, please," she said firmly.

After a moment's hesitation, he complied with her command, layering the bricks, making swift work of it, never taking his gaze from her. He felt greatly intrigued by her breasts. He could not fathom what it was about those soft plump mounds beneath the worn linen that so commanded his attention. Were they on his own body, he would have been appalled by the excess fatty flesh, yet gazing upon her, he found his

fingers clenching and unclenching, desirous to touch, perhaps cup their plump weight in his hands. For a mere human, she had a powerful presence. He considered the possibility that—wee as she was—she might be quite dangerous. After all, there were things in Faery minute of stature capable of inflicting unspeakable pain.

"Thank you," she said, rubbing her hands together before the blaze that sputtered in the hearth. "Those are peat bricks, aren't they? I read about them once."

"Aye."

"Interesting," she murmured thoughtfully. "They don't look like I thought they did." Then she shook her head sharply and focused on him again. "What is the name of this castle?"

"Dun Haakon," he replied, then started. Where had that name come from? His king had told him naught about his temporary quarters.

"Where am I?"

More knowledge he had no answers for: "On *Eilean A Cheo*."

"Where?" she asked blankly.

" 'Tis Gaelic for 'misty isle.' We are on the Isle of Skye." Mayhap it was knowledge his king had taught him long ago, he decided. There, silent until needed. His king had oft told him he'd prepared him for any place, any time.

Jane took a deep breath. "What year is it?"

"Fourteen hundred twenty-eight."

She inhaled sharply. "And how long have you lived here?"

"I doona live here. I am to remain but one passing of the moon. I arrived yestreen."

"Where *do* you live?"

"You have many questions." He reflected for a moment, and decided there was no harm in answering her questions. He was, after all, Vengeance. Powerful. Perfect. Deadly. "I live with my king in his kingdom."

"And where is that?"

"In Faery."

Jane swallowed. "Fairy?" she said weakly.

"Aye. My king is the Unseelie king. I am his Vengeance. And I am perfect," he added, as if an afterthought.

"That's highly debatable," Jane muttered.

"Nay. 'Tis not. I am perfect. My king tells me so. He tells me I will be the most feared warrior ever to live, that the name of Vengeance will endure in legend for eternity."

"I'm quaking," Jane said dryly, with an aggrieved expression.

He looked at her then, hard. Her hair, her face, her breasts, then lower still, his gaze lingering on her smooth bare legs and slender ankles. "You are not at all what I expected of humans," he said finally.

Go with it, she told herself. Since none of this makes any sense, just run with what he's told you and see where it leads.

"You aren't what I expected of a fairy," she said lightly.

"Aren't you supposed to have sparkly little wings?"

"I doona think I am a fairy," he said carefully.

"Then you're human?" she pressed.

He looked perplexed, then gave a faint shake of his head.

"Well, if you're not a fairy and you're not human, what are you?"

His brows dipped and he shifted uncomfortably but made no reply.

"Well?" she encouraged.

After a long pause he said, "I will be needing my shirt back, lass. You may find clothing in the round tower down the corridor." He pointed behind her. "Go now."

"We're not done with this conversation, Aedan," she said, eyes narrowing.

"Vengeance."

"I'm not going to stop asking questions, *Aedan*. I have oodles of them."

He shrugged, rose, and wandered over to the window, turning his back to her.

"And I'm hungry, and when I get hungry I get grumpy. You do have food, don't you?"

He remained stoically silent. A few moments later he heard her snort, then stomp off in search of clothing.

If you're not a fairy and you're not human, what are you? Her question hung in the air after she'd left, unanswered.

Unanswerable.

Verily, he didn't know.

Five

She was a demanding creature.

Vengeance ended up having to make three trips into Kyleakin to acquire those things the lass deemed "the bare necessities." It was abundantly clear that she had no plans of leaving. Indeed, she intended to loll in the lap of luxury for the duration of her stay. Because he wasn't certain if his liege had arranged her presence as part of some mysterious plan he'd chosen not to impart, and because he'd been told to reside at the castle until summoned, it seemed he must share his temporary quarters. He was greatly uneasy and just wished he knew what was expected of him. How could he act on his king's behalf if he knew not why he was there?

On his first foray into Kyleakin—the only trip made of his own volition while she'd been occupied rummaging through trunks in the round tower—he'd purchased naught but day-old bread so they both might eat that eve. Although he found the heat and colors of the landscape chafing, he was relieved to escape her disconcerting presence and foolishly believed procuring food might silence her ever-wagging tongue.

When she discovered he'd "gone shopping" without informing her, she'd tossed her mass of shining curls and scowled, ordering him to procure additional items. The second time he'd spent a fair amount of the gold coin his liege had given him purchasing clean (so mayhap they were a bit scratchy and rough, but *he* didn't even need them to begin

with) woolens, meat, cheese, fruit, quills, ink, and three fat, outrageously costly sheets of parchment—the parchment and quills because she'd proclaimed she was "a writer" and it was imperative she write every day without fail. At first he'd been puzzled by her bragging that she knew her letters, then he realized it was, like as not, a rare achievement for a mere mortal. He imagined he knew many more letters than she, and if she still needed to practice them, she was a sorry apprentice indeed.

Unimpressed with the results of his second expedition, she'd sent him back a *third* time, with a tidy little list on a scrap of parchment, to find more parchment, coffee beans or strong tea, a cauldron, mugs, eating tools, a supply of rags and vinegar for cleaning, *soft* woolens, down ticks, wine, and "unless you wish to fish the sea yourself," fresh fish for the useless furry beastie.

Vengeance, being ordered about by a wee woman. Fetching food for a mouse-catcher.

Still, she was a mesmerizing thing. Especially in the pale pink gown she'd dug out of one of the many trunks. Her eyes sparkled with irritation or as she listed her demands, her breasts jiggled softly when she gestured, then she turned all cooing and tender as she stooped to scratch the beastie behind its furry ears.

Making him wonder what her slender fingers might feel like in his hair.

He was unprepared for one such as she and wondered why his king had not forewarned him that humans could be so... intriguing. None that he'd e'er encountered in his past travels had been so compelling, and his king had e'er painted them

as coarse, sullen, and stupid creatures, easily manipulated by higher beings like Vengeance.

He'd not yet manipulated the smallest portion of his current circumstances, too busy being ordered about by her. *Build me a fire, give me your shirt, buy me this, buy me that. Hmph!* What might she demand next? He—the formidable hand of the fairy king's wrath—was almost afraid to find out.

"Kiss me."

"What?" he said blankly.

"Kiss me," she repeated, with an encouraging little nod.

Vengeance stepped back, inwardly cursing himself for retreating, but something about the fiery lass made him itch to flee to the farthest reaches of the isle. At her direction, he'd fluffed several heavy down ticks on the sole bed in the keep. She was happily spreading it with soft woolens and a luxurious green velvet throw he'd not intended to buy. He'd been coerced into taking it by the proprietor, who'd been delighted to hear a woman was in residence at Dun Haakon and had eagerly inquired "Be ye the new laird and lady of Dun Haakon?" Scowling, he'd flung coin at the shopkeeper, snatched up the bedclothes, and made haste from the establishment.

He was beginning to resent that his king had given him no orders. There, in his dark kingdom, Vengeance knew who he was and what his aim. Here, he was lost, abandoned in a stifling, garish world he did not understand, surrounded by creatures he could not fathom, with not one word of guidance

from his liege.

And now the wench wanted him to do something else. Precisely what, he wasn't certain, but he suspected it boded ill for him. She was a creature greatly preoccupied with her physical comforts, and down that path—so his king oft said—lay weakness, folly, and ruin. Vengeance had few physical needs, merely food, water, and the occasional hour of rest.

"Kiss me," she said, making a plump pucker with her lips. She gave the velvet coverlet a final smoothing. "I think it might help you remember."

"What exactly is a kiss?" he asked suspiciously.

Her eyes widened and she regarded him with amazement. "You don't know what a kiss is?" she exclaimed.

"Why should I? 'Tis a mortal thing, is it not?"

She cocked her head and looked as if she were having a heated internal debate. After a moment she appeared to reach a decision and stepped closer to him. Stoically, he held his ground this time, refusing to cede an inch.

"I merely want to press my lips against yours," she said, innocence knitted to a disarming smile. "Push them together, like so." She demonstrated, and the lush moue of her mouth tugged something deep in his groin.

"Nay. You may not touch me," he said stiffly.

She leaned closer. He caught a faint scent, something sweet and flowery on her fiery tresses. It made him want to press his face to her hair, inhale greedily, and stroke the coppery curls.

He leaned back. Fortunately, the lass was too short to reach his face without his cooperation. Or a step stool.

"You are so stubborn," she said, with a gusty sigh. "Fine, let's talk then. It's pretty clear we have a *lot* to talk about." She paused, then, "He doesn't know what kisses are," she muttered to herself, shaking her head. "*That's* never happened in my dreams before." Perching on the end of the bed, her feet dangling, she patted the space beside her. "Come. Sit by me."

"Nay." When the kitten jumped daintily onto the bed and spilled across the velvet coverlet, he scowled at it. "You or that bedraggled mop of fur—I'm fair uncertain which is more useless. At least the beastie doesna prattle on so."

"But the beastie can't kiss either," she said archly. "And it's not bedraggled. Don't insult my kitten," she added defensively.

"You attribute high value to these kisses of yours. I scarce believe they are worth much," he said scornfully.

"That's because you haven't kissed me yet. If you did, you'd know."

Vengeance moved, in spite of his best intentions, to stand at the foot of the bed between her legs. He stared down at her. She scooped up the kitten and pressed her lips to its furry head. He closed his eyes and fought a tide of images that made no sense to him.

"Perhaps you're afraid," she said sweetly.

He opened his eyes. "I fear nothing."

"Then why won't you let me do something so harmless? See? The kitten survived unscathed."

He struggled with the answer for a moment, then said simply, "You may not touch me. 'Tis forbidden."

"Why not, and by whom?"

"I obey my king. And 'tis none of your concern why."

"I think it is. I thought you were a man who thought for himself. A warrior, a leader. Now you tell me you follow orders like some little puppet."

"Puppet?"

"An imitation of a real person fashioned of wood, pulled this way and that by its master. You're nothing but a servant, are you?"

Her delicate sneer cut him to the quick, and he flinched angrily. Who was she calling a servant? He was Vengeance, he was perfect and strong and... *Och, he was his king's servant*. Why did that chafe? Why did he suffer the odd sensation that once he'd not been anyone's serf but a leader in his own right?

"Why do you obey him?" she pressed. "Does this king of yours mean so much to you? Is he so good to you? Tell me about him."

Vengeance opened his mouth, closed it again, and left the room silently.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"To prepare a meal, then you will sleep and leave me in

peace," he growled over his shoulder.

Jane ate in bed, alone but for the kitten. Aedan brought her fish roasted over an open fire and a blackened potato that had obviously been stuffed in the coals to cook, accompanied by a similarly charred turnip, then left in silence. No salt. No butter for the dry potato. Not one drop of lemon for the fish.

Warily, she conceded that she was probably not dreaming—the fare had never been so unpalatable in one of her dreams. And upon reflection, she realized that although she'd attended many dream feasts, she'd never actually eaten anything at any of them. Now, she choked it down because she was too emotionally drained to attempt cooking for herself over an open fire. Tomorrow was another day.

The tiger-striped kitten, whom she'd christened Sexpot (after apologetically peeking beneath her tail) because of the way the little tyke sashayed about as if outrageously pleased with herself, hungrily devoured a tender fish filet, then busied herself scrubbing her whiskers with little spit-moistened paws while Jane puzzled over her situation.

She'd been astonished to discover Aedan had no idea what a kiss was, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it made.

Aedan not only didn't know he was Aedan, he didn't remember that he was a *man*, hence he didn't recall the intimacies of lovemaking!

She wondered if that made him a virgin of sorts. When they finally made love—and there was no doubt in her mind that

they would, one way or another, even if she had to ambush and attack him—would he have any idea what it was all about? How strange to think that she might have to teach him, he who'd been her inexhaustible dream tutor.

He certainly hadn't liked being provoked, she mused. He'd grown increasingly agitated when she'd mocked him for obeying his king and had visibly bristled at the idea of being a mere servant. Still, despite such promising reactions, he had a formidable shell that was going to be difficult to penetrate. It would help if she knew what had happened to him. She needed to make him talk about his "king," and find out when and how they'd met. Were there indeed a "fairy king," perhaps the being had enchanted him. The idea taxed Jane's credulity, but, all things considered, she supposed she couldn't suspend disbelief without suspending it fully. Until she reached some concrete conclusions about what was going on, she would be unwise to discount any possibilities.

Whatever had happened to him, she had to undo it. She hoped it wouldn't take too long, because she wasn't sure how long she could stand watching her soulmate glare at her with blatant distrust and dislike. Withholding kisses. Refusing to let her touch him.

You have one month here with him, no more, a woman's lilting voice whispered.

Sexpot stopped grooming, paw frozen before her face. She arched into a horseshoe shape and emitted a ferocious hiss.

"Wh-what?" Jane stammered, glancing about.

Cease with your absurd protestations that this place is not real. You are in the fifteenth century, Jane Sillee. And here

you may stay, if you succeed. You have but one full cycle of the moon in the sky to make him remember who he is.

Jane opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again, but nothing came out. Sexpot suffered no such problem, growling low and long. Gently smoothing the spiked hairs on the kitten's back, Jane wet her lips and swallowed. "That's impossible, the man will hardly speak to me! And who are you?" she demanded. *I'm talking to a disembodied voice*, she thought, bewildered.

I'm not the one who doesn't know. Worry about him.

"Don't be cryptic. Who are you?" Jane hissed.

There was no reply. After a few moments, Sexpot's back no longer resembled a porcupine's, and Jane realized that whoever had spoken was gone.

"Well, just what am I supposed to do?" she shouted angrily. A month wasn't a whole lot of time to figure out what had happened to him and to help him remember who he was. She'd like to know who was making up the rules. She had a bone or two to pick with them.

Aedan appeared in the doorway, glancing hastily about the chamber. Only after ascertaining she was alone and in no apparent danger did he speak. "What are you yelling about?" he demanded.

Jane stared at him, framed in the doorway, gilded by a shaft of silvery moonlight that spilled in the open window, his sculpted chest bare, begging her touch.

She was suddenly stricken by two certainties that she felt in the marrow of her bones: that as the woman had said, she

truly was in the fifteenth century, and that if she didn't help him remember, something terrible beyond her ability to imagine would become of him. Would he live and die the icy, inhuman creature he'd become? Perhaps turn into something even worse?

"Oh, Aedan," she said, the words hitching in her throat. All her love and longing and fear were in his name.

"I am *Vengeance*," he snarled. "When will you accept that?"

When he spun about and stalked from the chamber, Jane sat for a long time, looking around, examining everything anew, wondering how she could have thought for even a moment that she might be dreaming. The reason everything had seemed so real was because it *was* so real. She fell back onto the bed and stared at the cobwebby ceiling through the shimmer of silent tears. "I won't lose you, Aedan," she whispered.

Hours later, Vengeance stood at the foot of the bed, watching her sleep. He'd passed a time of restless slumber on the floor in the hall and awakened intensely agitated. His rest had not been of the kind he'd known in Faery—an edgy, mostly aware state of short duration. Nay, he'd fallen into deep oblivion for far longer than usual, and his slumbering mind had gone on strange journeys. Upon awakening, his memory of those places had dissolved with the suddenness of a bubble bursting, leaving him with the nagging feeling that he'd forgotten something of import.

Troubled, he'd sought her. She was sprawled on her back, pink gown bunched about her thighs, masses of fiery curls

about her face. The kitten of which she seemed strangely fond—and it was too stringy to be palatable over a fire, nor was it capable of useful labor, hence her interest in it baffled him—was also sprawled on its back and had managed to insinuate itself into her hair. Its tiny paws curled and uncurled while it emitted a most odd sound. A bit of drool escaped its thin pink lips.

Cautiously, Vengeance lowered himself onto the bed. The lass stirred and stretched but did not awaken. The kitten curled itself into a circle and purred louder.

Gingerly, Vengeance plucked up a ringlet of her hair and held it between his fingers. It shimmered in the moonlight, all the hues of flame: golden and coppery and bronze. It was unlike aught he'd seen before. There were more colors in a simple hank of her hair than had been in the entirety of his world until yesterday.

He smoothed the curl between his thumb and forefinger.

The kitten opened a golden eye and stared at Vengeance's dark hand.

It did not flee him, he mused, which confirmed he wasn't fairy; for 'twas well known that cats loathed fairies. On the other hand, it didn't attempt to touch him, which he supposed meant he wasn't human either, for the thing certainly flung itself at the lass at every opportunity.

So what am I?

Sliding his hand beneath her tresses, he sneaked a quick glance at her. Her eyes were still closed, her lips slightly parted. Her breasts rising and falling gently.

Two hands.

It felt. So. Good.

There certainly was a lot of touching going on in this place. Even the kitten seemed to crave it. And she—ah, *she* touched everything. Petted the beastie, stroked the velvety coverlet he'd procured in Kyleakin, and would have touched him a dozen times or more—he'd seen it in her eyes. *Kiss me*, she'd said, and he'd nearly crushed her in his arms, intrigued by this "pressing of the lips" she'd described. The mere thought of touching such warmth did alarming things to his body. Tentatively, he touched the tip of his index finger to her cheek, then snatched it away.

The kitten buried its pink nose in her hair. After a moment's pause, Vengeance did, too. Then rested his cheek lightly against it, absorbing the sensation against his skin.

Why do you obey him? Is he so good to you?

Vengeance tried to ponder that thought. His king was... well, his king. What right did Vengeance have to question whether his liege was good to him? It was not his place!

Why not? For the first time in centuries, unhampered by the constant coercion of the king's dark spells, an independent thought sprouted and thrust down a thick taproot in his mind. He had no idea whence such a blasphemous thought had come, but it had, and it defied his efforts to cast it out. Pain lanced through his head behind his eyes. Excruciating pressure built at his temples, and he clamped his hands to his ears as if to silence voices only he could hear.

Aedan, come quickly, I have something to show you. Da

brought me a baby pine marten! A lass's voice, a lass who'd once been terribly important to him. A wee child of eight, about whom he'd fretted and tried to protect. *Mary, she'll be fine with the wee pet,* a man's voice said.

But we're sailin' out on the morrow, Mary protested. *'Tis wounded and might harm her without meanin' to.*

Aedan has a way with the wee creatures, and he'll watch o'er his sister.

"Aedan," he breathed, testing the sound of it on his tongue.

"Vengeance," he whispered after a moment.

Neither name fit him like skin on bones. Neither place he'd been—neither his land of ice nor this isle—felt like well-worn boots, broken in and suited to the heel.

He suffered a fierce urge to claw his way from his own body, so strange and ill-fashioned did it suddenly seem. In his king's land he knew who he was and what purpose he served. But here, och, here, he knew nothing.

Nothing but pain in places deep in his head and tingles in places deep in his groin.

Warily, he eyed the pale curves of her legs peeking from the hem of the gown. How smooth they looked... how warm.

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, envisioning his beloved home with his king.

Be ye the new laird and lady of Dun Haakon? the shopkeeper queried brightly in his mind, obliterating his soothing image of ice and shadow.

"Nay," he whispered. "I am Vengeance."

Six

The villagers descended upon the castle at daybreak.

Jane awakened slowly, feeling disoriented and vulnerable. She'd not dreamed of Aedan, and if she'd suffered any remnants of doubts that she was in the fifteenth century before she'd fallen asleep, they were gone now. She'd never slept through an entire night without at least one dream of her Highland love.

At first she wasn't certain what had awakened her, then the clamor of voices rose in the hall beyond the open door of the bedchamber. High-pitched and excited, they were punctuated by stilted, grudging replies in Aedan's deep burr.

Swiftly she performed her morning ritual of positive reinforcement by announcing brightly to the empty bedchamber, "It's today! What better day could it be?" She'd read somewhere that such small litanies were useful in setting one's mood, so she recited it each morning without fail. Yesterday was a memory. Tomorrow was a hope.

Today was another day to live and do one's best to love. In her estimation that was pretty much all a person could ask.

Kissing the drowsy kitten on the head, she slipped from the bed, quickly stripped off her wrinkled dress, then donned the simple yellow gown she'd unearthed yesterday while going through the trunks. She was looking forward to wearing it, because it was undeniably romantic with its low, laced bodice

and flowing skirt. Coupled with the complete lack of undergarments in any of the trunks, she felt positively sinful. Ready for her man at any moment. How she hoped it would be today!

Casting a quick glance about the room, she narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. She was going to want a few more items from the nearby village, and soon, specifically a large bathtub and whatever medieval people used for toothpaste and soap. Lured by the hum of voices, she hurried from the bedchamber.

Vengeance backed against the hearth like a cornered animal. A dozen yammering villagers thrust baked goods and gifts at him and prattled nonstop about some legend and how delighted they were to have a MacKinnon back to watch over them. How they would serve him faithfully. How they planned to rebuild his castle.

Him—watch over them? He'd as soon sweep his hand and raze the room, leaving naught but bones and silence!

But he kept both his hands, and the fairy gifts of destructive power his king had given him, carefully behind his back, because he didn't know what the blethering hell his liege wanted. Rage simmered in his veins—rage at the villagers, rage at his liege—stunning him with its intensity. Then *she* sauntered in and some of the rage dissipated, ousted by discomfort of another sort, slightly more palatable but no less disconcerting.

She was a sunbeam flickering about the gloomy interior of the hall. As he watched in tense silence, she smiled and

spoke and took the villagers' hands in hers, welcoming the entire ragamuffin lot of them into what had been, for a blissfully short time, *his* quarters alone. How and when had he so completely lost control of himself and his environ? he wondered. Was control something the Fates leeched away slowly over a period of time, or a thing instantaneously nihilated by the mere appearance of a female? Enter woman—exit order.

And och, how they were smiling at her, beaming and adoring, clearly accepting her as their lady!

"She's *not* a MacKinnon," he snapped. Best he swiftly disabuse them of the foolish notion that he was laird and she lady.

All heads swiveled to look at him.

"Milord," one of them said hesitantly after a pained pause, "'tis naught of our concern if ye've handfasted her or no. We're simply pleased to welcome ye both."

"Nor am *I* a MacKinnon," he said stiffly.

A dozen people gaped, then burst into uneasy laughter. An elderly man with silver hair, clad in russet trews and a linen shirt, shook his head and smiled gently. "Come," he beckoned, hastening from the hall into the adjoining wing.

Wholly irritated with himself for doing so, Vengeance sought the lass's gaze. He was so accustomed to obeying orders that making simple decisions, like whether or not to follow the elder, paralyzed him. He despised the confusion he felt, despised being left to his own devices. She stepped toward him, looking as if she planned to tuck her hand through his

arm. Baring his teeth in a silent snarl, he spun around and followed the old man. Better his own decisions, he decided, then to rely upon *her*.

A few moments later, he stood in the round tower watching the elderly man remove dusty woolens draped over objects stacked behind an assortment of trunks near the wall. The elder seemed to be looking for one item in particular, and upon locating it, devoted much care to wiping it free of dust. Then he swiveled it about and propped it in front of him, where all could see.

Vengeance sucked in a harsh breath. The elder had uncovered a portrait of a dark-haired girl sitting between a man and a woman. The man bore an eerie resemblance to himself. The woman was a beauty with wild blond tresses. But the little girl—ah, merely gazing upon her filled him with pain. He closed his eyes, his breathing suddenly rapid and shallow.

But you canna leave me, Aedan! Ma and Da hoe gone sailin' and I canna bear to be alone! Nay, Aedan, dinna be leavin' me! I've a terrible feelin' you willna be comin' back!

But this "Aedan," whoever he was, had had to leave. He'd had no choice.

Vengeance wondered who the man and child were and how he knew of them. But such thoughts pained his head so he thrust them from his mind. 'Twas none of his concern.

" 'Tis Findanus and Saucy Mary, with their daughter, Rose," the old man informed him. "They promised centuries ago that although the keep might be abandoned, one day a MacKinnon would return, the village would prosper, and the castle would be filled with clan again."

"I am *not* a MacKinnon," Vengeance growled.

The elder retrieved yet another portrait of three men riding into battle. Even Vengeance was forced to concede his resemblance to them was startling.

"'Tis Duncan, Robert, and Niles MacKinnon. The brothers were killed fighting for Robert the Bruce more than a century ago. The keep has stood vacant since. The remaining MacKinnon resettled easterly, on the mainland."

"I am no kin of theirs," Vengeance said stiffly.

The lass who'd invaded his castle snorted. "You look just like them. Anyone can see the resemblance. You're obviously a MacKinnon."

" 'Tis an uncanny coincidence, naught more."

The villagers were silent for a time, watching their elder for a cue. The old man measured him for several moments, then spoke in a tone one might employ to gentle a wild animal. "We came to offer our services. We brought food, drink, and materials to rebuild. We will arrive each morn at daybreak and remain as yer servants 'til dusk. We pray ye choose to remain with us. 'Tis clear ye are a warrior and a leader. Whatever name ye go by, we would be pleased to call ye laird."

Vengeance felt a peculiar helplessness steal over him. The man was saying that whether he was MacKinnon or not, they needed a protector and they wanted *him*. He felt a simultaneous disdain, a sense that he was above it all, yet... a tentative tide of pleasure.

He longed to put a stop to it—to cast the villagers out, to

force the female to leave—but not being privy to his king's purpose in sending him there, he couldn't, lest he undermine his liege's plan. It was possible that his king expected him to submit to a fortnight of mortal doings to prove how stoically he could endure and demonstrate how well he would perform amongst them in the future. There was also the possibility that since he was his king's emissary in the mortal realm, he might have future need of this castle, and his king *intended* the villagers to rebuild it. He shook his head, unable to fathom why he'd been abandoned without direction.

"Oh, how lovely of you to offer!" the lass exclaimed. "How kind you all are! We'd *love* your help. I'm Jane, by the way," she told the elder, clasping his hand and smiling. "Jane Sillee."

Vengeance left the tower without saying another word. *Jane*. He rolled the name over in his mind. She was called Jane. "Jane Sillee," he whispered. He liked the sound of it on his lips.

His head began to pound again.

"*What's ailing him, milady?*" *Elias, the village elder*, asked after Aedan had departed and introductions had been made all around.

"He suffered a fall and took a severe blow to his head," she lied smoothly. "It may be some time before he's himself again. His memory has suffered, and he's uncertain of many things."

"Is he a MacKinnon from one o' their holdings in the east?"

Elias asked.

Jane nodded, ruing the lie but deeming it necessary.

"I was fair certain, there's no mistakin' the look," Elias said. "Since the battle at Bannockburn, they've left the isle untended, busy with their holdings on the mainland. Long have we prayed they would send one of their kin to stand for us, to reside on the isle again."

"And so they have, but he was injured on the way here and we must help him remember," Jane said, seizing the opportunity offered, grateful that she now had co-conspirators. "Touch him frequently, although it may appear to unsettle him," she told them. "I believe it helps. And bring children around," she said, remembering how in her dreams Aedan had adored children. "The more the better. Perhaps they could play in the yard while we work."

"We? *Ye* needn't labor like a serf, milady," a young woman exclaimed.

"I intend to be part of rebuilding our home," Jane said firmly. *Our home*—how she liked the sound of that! She was gratified to see a glint of appreciation in the women's eyes. There were several approving nods.

"Also, I heard somewhere that familiar scents can help stir memories, so if you wouldn't mind teaching me to bake some things you think he might like, I'd be most appreciative. I'm afraid I'm not the best cook," she admitted. "But I'm eager to learn."

More approving nods.

Jane beamed. Her morning litany really did help: Today was

turning out to be a fine day after all.

Seven

And so they settled into a routine with which Jane was pleased, despite Aedan's continued insistence that he was not a MacKinnon. Days sped by, too quickly for Jane's liking, but small progress was being made both with the estate and with the taciturn, brooding man who called himself Vengeance. Each day, Jane felt more at home at Dun Haakon, more at home with being in the fifteenth century.

As promised, each morning at daybreak, the villagers arrived in force. They were hard workers, and although the men departed in the late afternoon to tend their own small plots of land, the women and children remained, laboring cheerfully at Jane's side. They swept and scrubbed the floors; scraped away cobwebs; polished old earthenware mugs and platters, candlesticks, and oil globes; and aired out tapestries, hanging them with care. They repaired and oiled what furniture remained, stored beneath cloths saturated with the dust of decades.

Before long, the great hall sported a gleaming honey-blond table and a dozen chairs. The sole bed had been lavishly (and with much giggling by the women) covered with the plumpest pillows and softest fabrics the village had to offer. Sconces were reattached to the stone walls, displaying sparkling globes of oil with fat, waxy wicks. The women stitched pillows for the wooden chairs and strung packets of herbs from the beams.

The kitchen had fallen into complete rubble decades ago, and it would take some time to rebuild. After much thought, Jane

decided it wasn't *too* risky to suggest the piping of water from a freshwater spring behind the castle and direct the construction of a large reservoir over a four-sided hearth, guaranteeing hot water at a moment's notice. She also sketched plans for counters and cabinets and a massive centrally located butcher's block.

In the meantime, Jane was learning to cook over the open fire in the great hall. Each afternoon the women taught her a new dish. Unfortunately, each evening, she ate it with a man who refused to eat anything but hard bread, no matter how she tried to tempt him.

Late into the twilight hours, Jane scribbled busily away before the fire, sometimes making notes, sometimes working on her manuscript, all the while peeking at Aedan over her papers and writing the future she hoped to have with him. She liked the laborious ritual of using quill and ink, the flames in the open hearth licking at her slippered toes, the hum of crickets and soft hooting of owls. She relished the complete absence of tires screeching, car alarms pealing, and planes flying overhead. In all her life, she'd never experienced such absolute, awe-inspiring stillness.

By the end of the first week of renovations, she'd begun to draw hope from Aedan's bewildered silence. Although he refused to speak to her, day by day, he participated a bit more in the repairs to the estate. And day by day, he seemed a bit less forbidding. No longer did she see disdain and loathing in his gaze, but confusion and... uncertainty? As if he didn't understand his place and how he fit into the grand scheme of things.

Jane intended to use her month as wisely as possible. She

learned in her psychology courses at Purdue that attacking "amnesia" head-on could drive the person deeper into denial, even induce catatonia. So after much hard thought, she'd decided to give Aedan two weeks of absolutely no pressure, other than acclimating to his new environment. Two weeks of working, of being silently companionable, of not touching him as she so longed to do, despite the misery of being with him but forbidden to demonstrate her love and affection.

After those two weeks, she promised herself the seduction would begin. No more baths in Kyleakin in one of the village women's homes. She would begin bathing before the fire in the hall. No more proper gowns in the evening. She would wear lower bodices and higher hems.

And so, Jane bided her time, cuddled with Sexpot in the luxurious bed, and dreamed about the night when Aedan would lay beside her and speak her name in those husky tones that promised lovemaking to make a girl's toes curl.

Aedan stood on the recently repaired front steps of the castle and stretched his arms above his head, easing the tightness in his back. The night sky was streaked with purple. Stars twinkled above the treetops, and a crescent moon silvered the lawn. Every muscle in his body was sore from toting heavy stones from a nearby quarry to the castle.

Although he'd learned to avoid pain in the land of shadows, the current aches in his body were a strangely pleasurable sensation. He'd refused to participate in the repairs at first, withholding himself in silent and aloof censure, but much to his surprise, as he'd watched the village men work, he'd begun to hanker to lift, carry, and patch. His hands had itched

to get dirty, and his mind had been eager to redesign parts of the keep that had been inefficiently, and in places, hazardously constructed.

Pondering the three commands his king had given, he'd concluded there was nothing to prevent him from passing time more quickly by working.

When on the third day he'd silently joined the men, they'd worked with twice the vigor and smiled and jested more frequently. They asked his opinion on many things, leading him to discover with some surprise that he *had* opinions, and, further, that they seemed sound. They accepted him with minimal fuss, although they touched him with disconcerting frequency, clapping him on the shoulder and patting his arm.

Because they weren't females, he deemed it acceptable.

When they asked the occasional question, he evaded. He completely ignored the lass who doggedly remained in the castle, leaving only to traipse off to the village, from whence she returned clean and slightly damp.

And fragrant smelling. And warm and soft and sweet looking.

Sometimes, merely gazing upon her made him hurt inside.

Vengeance shook his head, as if to shake thoughts of her right out of it. With each passing day, things seemed different. The sky no longer seemed too brilliant to behold, the air no longer too stifling to breathe. He'd begun to anticipate working each day, because in the gloaming he could stand back and look at something—a wall recently shored up, steps re-laid, a roof repaired, an interior hearth redesigned—and know it was his

doing. He liked the feeling of laboring and rued that his king might deem it a flaw in his character, unsuitable for an exalted being.

And each day, when his thoughts turned toward his king, they were more often than not resentful thoughts. His king might not have bothered to inform him of his purpose at Dun Haakon, but the humans were more than willing to offer him ample purpose.

Purpose without pain.

Without *any* pain at all.

He had a blasphemous thought that took him by surprise and caused a headache of epic proportions that throbbed all through the night: He wondered if mayhap his king mightn't just forget about him.

Eight

Swiftly did one blasphemous thought breed another, the next more blasphemous, making the prior seem nearly innocuous. Swiftly did traitorous thought manifest itself in traitorous action.

It was on the evening of the eleventh day of his exile, when she was laying her meal on the long table in the great hall, that Vengeance began his fall from grace.

He'd labored arduously that day, and more than once his grip had slipped on a heavy stone. Furthering his unease, wee children from the village had played on the front lawn all afternoon. The sound of their high voices, bubbling with laughter as they chased a bladder-ball at the edge of the surf or teased the furry beastie with woolen yarns, had reverberated painfully inside his skull.

Now, he sat in the corner, far from the hearth, chewing dispiritedly on hard bread. Of late, he'd been eating loaf after loaf of it, his body starved by his daily labors. Yet no matter how much bread he consumed, he continued to lose mass and muscle and to feel lethargic and weak. He knew 'twas why his grip had slipped today.

Of late, when she spread the table with her rich and savory foods, his stomach roiled angrily, and on previous evenings, he'd left the castle and walked outdoors to avoid temptation.

But recently, indeed only this morning, he'd thought long and

hard about his king's remark concerning sustenance and had scrutinized the precise words of his command.

You must eat, but I would suggest you seek only bland foods.

I would suggest.

It was the most nebulous phrase his liege had ever uttered. *I would suggest.* That was not at all how his king spoke to Vengeance. It made one think the king might be... uncertain of himself, unwilling, for some unfathomable reason, to commit to a command. And "bland." How vague was bland? An engraved invitation to interpretation, that word was.

After much meditation, Vengeance concluded for himself—a thing coming shockingly easier each day—that apparently his king had suffered some uncertainty as to how hard Vengeance might be laboring, so he'd been unable to anticipate what sustenance his body would require. Thus, he had "suggested," leaving the matter to Vengeance's discretion. As his king had placed such a trust in him, Vengeance resolved he must not return to his king weakened in body and risk inciting his displeasure.

When he rose and joined her at the table, her eyes rounded in disbelief.

"I will dine with you this eve," he informed her, gazing at her. Nay, lapping her up with his eyes. The tantalizing scent of roasted suckling pig teased his nostrils; the glorious rainbow hues of fiery-haired Jane clad in an emerald gown teased something he couldn't name.

"No bread?" she managed after an incredulous pause.

" 'Tis not enough to sustain me through the day's labors."

"I see," she said carefully, as she hastened to lay another setting.

Vengeance eyed the food with great interest. She served him generous portions of roast pork swimming in juices and glazed with a jellied sauce, roasted potatoes in clotted cream with chive, some type of vegetable mix in yet another sauce, and thin strips of battered salmon. As a finishing touch, she added several ladles of a buttery-looking pudding.

When she placed it before him, he continued to eye it, knowing he'd not yet gone too far. He could still rise and return to his corner, to his bread.

I would suggest.

He glanced at her. She had a spoon in her mouth and was licking the clotted cream from it. That was all it took. He fell upon the food like a ravening beast, eating with his bare hands, shoving juicy, deliciously greasy pork into his mouth, stripping the tender meat from the bones with his teeth and tongue.

Christ, it was heavenly! Rich and succulent and warm.

Jane watched, astonished. It took him less than three minutes to devour every morsel she'd placed on his plate. His aquamarine eyes were wild, his sensual mouth glistening with juices from the roast, his hands—oh, God, he started licking his fingers, his firm pink lips sucking, and her temperature rose ten degrees.

Elation filled her. Although he'd never admitted that he'd been ordered to eat only bread, she'd figured it out herself. Each night while she'd dined, he'd shot furtive glances her

way, watching her eat, eyeing the food with blatant longing, and a time or two, she'd heard his stomach rumble.

"More." He shoved his platter at her.

Happily, she complied. And a third time, until he sat back, sighing.

His eyes were different, she mused, watching him. There was something new in them, a welcome defiance. She decided to test it.

"I don't think you should eat anything but old bread in the future," she provoked.

"I will eat what I deem fit. And 'tis no longer bread."

Her lips ached from the effort of suppressing a delighted smile. "I don't think that's wise," she pushed.

"I will eat what I wish!" he snapped.

Oh, Aedan, Jane thought lovingly, fighting a mist of joyous tears, *well done*. One tiny crack in the façade, and she had no doubt that a man of Aedan's strength and independence would begin cracking at an alarming rate now that it had begun. "If you insist," she said mildly.

"I do," he growled. "And pass me that wine. And fetch another flagon. I feel a deep thirst coming on." Centuries of thirst. For far more than wine.

Aedan couldn't get over the pleasure of eating. Sun-warmed tomatoes, sweet young corn drenched with freshly churned butter, roasts basted with garlic, baked apples in delicate

pastry smothered with cinnamon and honey. There were so many new, intriguing sensations! The fragrance of heather on the autumn breeze, the salty rhythmic lick of the ocean when he swam in it to bathe each eve, the brush of soft linen against his skin. Once, when no one had been in the castle, he'd removed his clothing and stretched naked on the velvet coverlet. Pressed his body into the soft ticks. Pondered lying there with *her*, but then he'd caught a rash from the coverlet that had made the part of him between his legs swell up. He'd swiftly dressed again and not repeated that indulgence. Unfortunately, the rash lingered, manifesting itself at odd intervals.

There were unpleasant sensations, too: sleeping on the hard, cold floor whilst she curled cozily in the overstuffed bed with the beastie. The tension of watching the lass's ankles and calves as she sauntered about. The sickness he felt in his stomach when he gazed upon the soft rise of her breasts in her gown.

He'd seen much more than that, yestreen, when the audacious wench had tugged a heavy tub before the fire and proceeded to fill it with pails of steaming water and sprinkle it with herbs.

He'd not comprehended what she was doing until she'd been as naked and rosy-bottomed as when she'd arrived at the castle a fortnight past, and then he'd been too stunned to move.

Feeling strangely nauseous, he'd finally gathered his wits and fled the hall, chased by the lass's soft derisive snort. He'd warred with himself on the newly laid terrace, only to return a quarter hour hence and watch her from the shadows of the

doorway where she couldn't see him. Swallowing hard, endeavoring to slow his breathing, to stop the thundering of his blood in his veins, he'd watched her soap and rinse every inch of her body.

When his hands were trembling and his body aching in odd places, he'd closed his eyes, but the images had been burned into his brain. Thirteen more days, he told himself. Less than a fortnight remained until he could return to his king.

But with each day that passed, his curiosity about her grew. What did she ponder when she sat before the hearth staring into the flames? Why had she no man when the other village women did? Why did she watch him with that expression on her face? Why did she labor so over her letters? Why did she want him to touch her? What would come of it, were he to comply?

And the most pressing question of late, as his thoughts turned less often to his king and more often to that puzzling pain between his legs or the hollow ache behind his breastbone:

How long would he be able to resist finding out?

Nine

"What are you writing?" Aedan asked casually, his tone implying that he cared not what she replied, or even if she did.

Although her heart leapt, Jane pretended to ignore him. They sat in chairs at catty-corner angles near the hearth in the great hall; she curled near a table and three bright oil globes, he practically inside the hearth atop the blaze. He'd been surreptitiously watching her across the space of half a dozen feet for over an hour, and his question was the first direct one he'd asked of her since her arrival at Dun Haakon that didn't concern castle matters. Concealing a smile, she continued writing as if she hadn't heard him:

He rose from the chair so abruptly that it toppled over, crashing to the floor. His aquamarine eyes glittering with desire, he ripped the sheaf of papers from her hands and threw them aside. He towered over her, his intense gaze seeming to delve into her very soul. "Forget these papers. Forget my question. I want you, Jane," he said roughly. "I need you. Now." He began to strip, unlacing his linen shirt, tugging it over his head. He pressed a finger to her lips when she began to speak. "Hush, lass. Doona deny me. 'Tis no use. I will have you this night. You are mine, and only mine, for all of ever, then yet another day."

"Why another day?" she whispered against his finger, her heart hammering with nervousness and anticipation. She'd never been with a man before, only dreamed of it. And the dark Highlander standing before her was every inch a dream come to life.

He flashed her a seductive grin as he unknotted his plaid and let it slip down over his taut buttocks lean, muscular hips. Bracing his hands on the arms of her chair, he lowered his head toward hers. "Because not even forever with you will be enough to satisfy me, sweet Jane. I'm a greedy, demanding man."

"I said what are you writing?" His voice was tight.

His hard body glistened bronze in the shimmering light of dozens of oil globes. "I can't resist you, lass. God knows I've tried," he groaned, his voice low and taut with need. "I think about you day and night, I can't sleep for wanting you. 'Tis a madness I fear will never abate."

Jane swallowed a dreamy sigh and paused, quill poised above the paper. She arched a brow at him, outwardly calm while inwardly melting. His eyes flashing in his dark face, he coiled tensely in his chair, as if he might leap up at any moment. And pounce. *Oh, if only!*

"Why do you care?" she said with a shrug, trying to sound nonchalant. She was sick of being patient. She knew that the presence of the villagers, the laboring with his hands on what had once been his home, and his nocturnal spying upon her in

the bath were beginning to take a toll. She'd been wise to take a passive role for the past two weeks, but it was time to be more proactive. She had twelve days, and she was *not* going to lose him.

"You do nothing without purpose," he said stiffly. "I merely wish to know your purpose in practicing your letters so faithfully each eve."

Jane pressed her quill to parchment again:

He tugged her up from the chair, crushing her body against the hard length of his own. Gazing into her eyes, he deliberately rocked his hips forward so she could feel his huge cock need. Hard and hot, his impressive erection he throbbed, pressing through the thin silk of her gown...

Jane blew out a breath of pure sexual frustration—writing love scenes sure could be sheer torture for a girl with no man of her own—and placed the quill aside. Sexpot promptly jumped onto the small side table and attacked the feather, shaking it violently. Rescuing the quill before the kitten shredded yet another one, she hesitated before answering. She knew that one inadvertent misstep might drive him back into his rigid shell. He'd made it clear he would never permit her to touch him. She had to find a way to coax him to touch her.

"I'm not practicing my letters. I write stories."

"What kind of stories?"

Jane stared at him hungrily. He was so damned sexy sitting there. Only yesterday he'd taken to wearing a plaid for the first time since his arrival, saying it was cooler to work in. There he sat looking just like *her* Aedan, clad in crimson and black and no shirt. His upper body glistened with a faint sheen of sweat as he perched as close to the fire as he could get.

"You wouldn't understand any of it," she said coolly.

"Understand what?" he said angrily. "I understand many things."

"You wouldn't understand what I write about," she goaded. "I write about human things, things you couldn't possibly understand. Remember, you're not human," she pressed. "By the way," she added sweetly, "have you figured out yet what you actually *are*?" There, she thought smugly, he looked incensed. Her Aedan was a proud man and didn't like to be belittled. Over the past week he'd begun to display resentment toward anything resembling a direct order, which pleased her and made her suspect that he would defy her outright, were she to issue a firm command.

Anger and confusion warred behind his eyes. "I have been laboring with other humans. You doona know what I can and can't understand."

"*Never* read my stories," she said sternly. "They are private. It's none of your business, Aedan."

"So long as I am laird of this castle, everything is my—" He broke off with a stricken expression.

"Laird of this castle?" she echoed, searching his gaze. He

hadn't even bothered to chastise her for calling him 'Aedan.'

He stared into her eyes a long moment, then said stiffly, "I meant that the villagers think I am, so if you're to live here, in what they think is my castle, you should abide by that perception, too. Or find another place to live, lass. That's all I meant," he snapped, then pushed himself angrily up from his chair. But at the doorway, he cast a glance over his shoulder so full of frustrated longing, so rife with desire, that it sent a shiver up her spine. It was plain to see that he was beginning to feel all the things he'd once felt, but couldn't understand them.

Much later, Jane scooped up her papers in one arm and Sexpot in the other. She knew *exactly* which scene of the manuscript she was working on to inadvertently leave lying about tomorrow.

Ten

The first time he kissed her slowly, brushing his lips lightly back and forth, creating a delicious sensual friction, until hers parted, yielding utterly. The second, deeper, even more intimately, and the third so possessively that it made her dizzy. His silky tongue tangled with hers. He fitted his mouth so completely over hers that she could scarcely breathe. If a kiss could speak, his was purring, "You are mine forever."

Subsequent kisses blended, wet and hot and intoxicating, one into another until her head was reeling. She trembled, burning with the scorching heat of desire.

She whimpered when he traced the curve of her jaw, down her neck to the top of her breast. His touch evoked a blend of lassitude and adrenaline that made her feel strong and weak at the same time. Soft and supple, yet close to aggression. Hot and needy and achy.

His aquamarine eyes promised lovemaking that would strip bare far more than her body. Gently slipping the sleeves of her gown from her shoulders, he bared her breasts to his hungry gaze. The chill air coupled with the molten promise in his eyes made her breasts feel tight and achy. When he lowered his dark head and captured a pouty nipple in his mouth, she whimpered with pleasure. When he buried his face between her breasts, slipping her gown down over her hips, she pressed her honeyed womanhood against him, clinging.

His lips seared her sensitive skin. He scattered light kisses

across her tummy, nipping and nibbling, then dropping to his knees before her.

She could barely stand, her knees so weak with desire, and when his hot tongue pressed to her hotter flesh, lapping sweetly at her passion juices most private heat, she nearly screamed with the exquisiteness of it.

Jane stood in the doorway of the great hall, a smile curving her lips, watching Aedan. Fifteen minutes ago, she'd informed him that she was going to take a quick nap before beginning preparations for their evening meal. She'd headed for the bedchamber, conveniently leaving a few pages of her manuscript lying beside the hearth, as if forgotten.

He'd nodded nonchalantly, but his gaze had betrayed him by drifting to the parchment. Shortly after retiring to the bedchamber, she'd crept back to the hall. He was standing by the fire, reading so intently that he didn't even notice her standing in the shadows of the stone doorway, watching as his eyes narrowed and his grip tightened on the parchment. After a few minutes, he wet his lips and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I feel quite rested now," she announced, striding briskly into the hall. "Hey!" she exclaimed, feigning outrage that he was snooping. "Those are my papers! I told you not to read them!"

His head shot up. His eyes were dark, his pupils dilated, his chest rising and falling as if he'd run a marathon.

He shook the parchments at her. "What are these... these..."

scribblings?" Vengeance demanded in a voice that should have been firm but came out sounding hoarse. His chest felt tight, that heavy part of him betwixt his legs... *och, Christ, it hurt!* distinctively, he palmed it through the fabric of his kilt to soothe it, hoping the pain would diminish, but touching it only seemed to make it worse. Appalled, he removed his hand and glared at her. She seemed to find the gesture quite fascinating.

Jane cornered him and tried to grab the papers from his hand, but he held them above his head.

"Just give them back," she snapped.

"I doona think so," he growled. He stood looking at her, her jaw, her neck. Her breasts. "This man you write of," he said tensely, "he has dark hair and eyes of my hue."

"So?" she said, doing her best to sound defensive.

" 'Tis *me* you write about," he accused. When she made no move to deny it, he scowled. " 'Tis in no fashion a proper woman might write—" He broke off, wondering what he knew of proper women when he knew naught of female humans but what he'd learned from her. He studied her, trying to think, which was immensely difficult with parts of his body behaving so strangely. His breath was too short and shallow, his mouth parched, his heart pounding. He felt intensely alive, all his senses stirring... demanding. *Starving for touch*. "This pressing of the lips of yours makes one feel as if one is"—he glanced back at the papers—"burning with the scorching heat of desire?" He, who'd long been cold, ached to feel such heat.

"Yes—if a man's any good at it," she said archly. "But you're

not a man, remember? It probably wouldn't work for you," she added sweetly.

"You doona know that," he snapped.

"Trust me," she provoked. "I doubt you have the right stuff."

"I doona know what this right stuff of yours is, but I know that I am formed like a man," he said indignantly. "I look as all the villagers do." He thought hard for a moment. "Verily, I believe I am more well formed than the lot of them," he added defensively. "My legs more powerful," he said, moving his plaid to display a thigh for her. "See? And my shoulders are wider. I am greater of height and girth, with no excess fatty parts." He preened for her, and it was everything she could do not to drool. More well formed? Sheesh! The man could drive the sales of *Play girl* right through the roof!

"*Whatever*," Jane said, purloining one of her teenage niece Jessica's most irritating responses, guaranteed to provoke, issued in tones that implied *nothing* he could say or do might interest her.

"You would do well to not dismiss me so lightly," he growled.

They stared at each other for a long tense moment, then he glanced back at the parchment. "Regardless of whether I'm human or no, 'tis plain from your writings that you wish me to do such things to you." His tone challenged her to deny it.

Jane swallowed hard. Should she pretend to order him not to? Should she concede? She was on tricky terrain, uncertain what would push his buttons just a teeny bit further. He was so close to falling on her like a ravening beast—and God,

how she wanted him to! As fate would have it, her very indecision provoked him correctly. As she hesitated, nibbling on her lower lip, a thing she did often while thinking hard, his gaze fixed there. His eyes narrowed.

"You *do* wish me to," he accused. "Else you would have denied it outright."

She nodded.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely.

"It will... er, make me happy?" she managed lamely, twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

He nodded, as if that were a fine excuse. After a moment's hesitation he croaked, "You wish this now? At this very moment? Here?" He fisted his hands, half crumpling the parchment. His blasted voice had risen and dropped again like a green lad's. He felt incomparably foolish. Yet... also as if he faced a moment of ineluctable destiny.

Jane's throat constricted with longing as she gazed at him. She wanted him every bit as much as she needed to breathe and eat. He was necessary to the care and feeding of her soul. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Vengeance stood motionless, his mind racing. His king had ordered that he not permit a human female to touch him. But he'd said nothing about *Vengeance* touching a human female. There was this thing inside him, this great gnawing curiosity. He wondered if there was such a thing as "burning with the scorching heat of desire," and if so, just how it might feel. "If I do this, you may not touch me," he warned.

"I can't touch you?" she echoed. "That's *so* ridiculous! Don't

you wonder why your king made up that idiotic rule?"

"You will do as I demand. I will do this thing as you have written, only if you vow not to touch me."

"Fine," she snapped. *Anything* to get his hands on her. She'd cheerfully acquiesce to being tied to the bed, if she must. Hmm... intriguing thought, that.

When he stepped forward, she tipped her head back and gazed up at him.

He glanced swiftly at the parchment, as if committing it to memory. "First, I am to brush my lips lightly across yours. You are to slightly part yours," he directed.

"I think we can play it by ear," she said, leaning minutely nearer, praying fervently that he wouldn't change his mind. She felt she might combust the moment he touched her, so long had she ached to feel his hands on her body.

He glanced back at the parchment with a look of alarm and confusion. "You mentioned naught of ears in your writing. Am I to do something with your ears, too?"

Jane nearly whimpered with frustration. Snatching the parchment from his hands, she said, "It's a figure of speech, Aedan. It means we'll figure it out as we go along. Just begin. You'll do fine, I promise."

"I'm merely trying to ascertain we both know our proper positions," he said stiffly.

The hell with proper, Jane thought, moistening her lips with her tongue and gazing up at him longingly. The last thing she wanted from him was *proper*. "Touch me," she encouraged.

Warily, he leaned closer.

Jane swayed forward, drawn like a magnet to steel. She wouldn't be satisfied until she was clinging to him like Saran Wrap. Although she was forbidden to out and out touch him, once he touched her, she certainly could press against him.

But still, he didn't move.

"Would you please just *start* already?"

"I am not quite certain I know what your 'most private heat' is," he admitted reluctantly. What was happening to him? he wondered. Complying with his demand, she was not touching him, but the tips of her breasts nearly brushed his chest, he could feel the heat of her body, and an alarming urgency flooding his.

"I'll help you find it," she assured him fervently.

"You're too short," he hedged.

It took Jane two seconds to retrieve the small footstool from beside the hearth, plop it down at his feet, and stand on it. It put them nose to nose, a mere inch apart.

She stared at him, heart thundering.

And he stared silently back.

Their breath mingled. His gaze dropped from her eyes to her lips. Back to her eyes, then lips again. He wet his lips, staring at her.

Jane kept her hands behind her back so she wouldn't touch him, knowing he'd use it as an excuse to leave. It was intensely intimate, such closeness without actually touching.

And the way he was looking at her—with such raw hunger and heat!

A small sound escaped her. He answered in kind, then looked startled by his involuntary groan. Jane scarcely dared breathe, waiting for him to move that last tiny half inch. His dark, raw sexuality coupled with his innocence of lovemaking was an irresistibly erotic combination. The man was an expert lover, of that she had no doubt, yet it was as if it were his first time ever, and each touch would be an undiscovered country to him.

She gave a quarter inch, and he met her halfway.

His lips touched hers.

God, they were cold! she thought, stunned. Icy.

God, she was warm, he thought, stunned. Blazing.

Fascinated, Vengeance pressed his mouth more snugly to hers. He knew he was supposed to use his tongue somehow, but wasn't certain he understood the mechanics of it.

"Taste me," she breathed against his lips. "Taste me like you would lick juice from your lips."

Ah, he thought, understanding. Mesmerized by the softness of her lips, he touched the tip of his tongue to them, running it over the seam, and when her lips parted, he tasted her like he was trying to remove a bit of cream from the center of a pastry.

She was infinitely sweeter.

And then his body seemed to take over, to understand something he didn't, and with a hoarse groan, he plunged his

tongue into her mouth and crushed her against him, locking his arms securely behind her back. But that wasn't good enough, he quickly decided, he needed her head just so, so he slipped his hands deep into her hair and clamped her face firmly, kissing her until they were both breathless.

It was incredible, he marveled, stopping to stare at her. He touched a finger to his own lips; they were warm.

And she got prettier when he kissed her! he thought, awestruck. Her lips got all swollen and cushy-looking, her eyes sparkled like jewels, and her skin grew rosy. *He'd* done that to her, he thought, with pride. He could make a lass prettier merely by pressing his lips to hers. 'Twas a gift his king had ne'er told him he possessed. He wondered how much prettier she'd get if he touched his lips to her in other places.

"You are lovely, lass," he said in a voice utterly unlike his own normal tone—indeed, it came out raspy and thick. "Nay, doona speak, I haven't finished."

He pressed his lips to hers again, swallowing her words. With butterfly light touches, his thumbs caressed smooth circles on the delicate skin of her neck, along the line of her jaw, and over her face. Then he drew back and ran his fingers lightly over her face, as if he were blind, absorbing the feel of every plane and angle from the downy soft brows to the pert nose and high bones of her cheeks, from the shape of her widow's peak to the point of her chin.

Her soft, lush lips.

When he rested a finger there too long, she gently sucked the tip of it, and heat lanced straight down to his groin. The

vision of her lips closed full and sweetly around his finger near made him crazed... reminded him of something else, long forgotten, something a lass might do that was sweeter than heaven. His breath caught in his throat.

She stared at him, her amber eyes glowing, wide, trusting, her lips around his finger. It made him nearly mad with some kind of pain in his breast.

Taking her face between his hands, he kissed her as if he could suck the heat of her right into his body, and indeed, it seemed he did. "I want to touch you 'till your skin smells of me," he growled, not knowing why. "Every inch of it."

But Jane understood. It was a purely male way of marking his territory, loving his woman until she bore his unique scent from head to toe. She whimpered assent into his mouth, her hands curled into fists behind her back because it was killing her to not touch him.

Then he lifted her from the stool, crushing her against him completely, holding her weight as if she were light as a feather, and his hard, hot arousal pressed into the vee of her thighs.

I'm dying, Vengeance realized dimly. The feel of her body against that swollen part of him that seemed to have never recovered from whatever rash he'd caught from the coverlet burned and throbbed angrily. He must be dying, because no man could withstand such pain for long.

Mayhap, he thought, once he'd undressed her as she'd directed in her parchments, he could doff his tartan, too, and she might tell him what was wrong with him.

But nay—he would press his lips to hers a few more times, for she might see the thing betwixt his legs and be disgusted. Flee him. For now, he was warm... so warm. He slipped his hands from her hair and down over her breasts. He shuddered, once, twice, and three times, before losing complete control of himself.

He had no idea what he'd done, lost to a madness of sorts, until he stood looking at her as she perched atop the small stool naked, tatters of her dress scattered across the floor. He had no clear memory of ripping her gown away, so urgent and fierce had his need been to bare her completely to his touch.

"Did I hurt you?" he demanded.

Jane shook her head, her eyes wide. "Touch me," she encouraged softly. "Find my most private heat. You may look for it wherever you wish," she encouraged, eyes sparkling.

He circled her slowly. She didn't move a muscle, merely stood naked on the stool as he marveled over every inch of her. And when he returned to face her, he sucked in a breath. She'd done it again—grown more beautiful. Her eyes were filled with some lazy, dreamy knowing he could only guess at. Glittering and sleepy and desirous, her skin flushed from head to toe.

He reached out with both hands and gathered the firm, plump weight of her breasts in his palms. They felt sweet, so sweet. Their eyes met and she made a soft mewling sound that shivered through him.

"Kiss—"

"Aye," he said instantly, knowing what she wanted, and lowered his head to the soft pillows of her breasts. Unable to comprehend why he wanted it so badly, he closed his lips over first one nipple, then the next. Unknowing why he did it, his hand slipped between her soft thighs, sought the warmth and wetness...

And images assaulted him—he was someone else—a man who knew much of soft thighs and heated loving. A man who'd lost everything, everyone:

"Aedan, please dinna go!" the child sobbed. "At least wait 'til Ma and Da come home!"

"I must go now, little one." The man crushed her in his arms, brushing helplessly at her tears. " 'Tis only for five years. Why you'll be but a lass often and three when I return." The man closed his eyes. "I left a note for Ma and Da..."

"Nay! Aedan. Dinna leave me," the child said, weeping as if her heart would break. "I love you!"

"Ahhh!" Vengeance roared, thrusting her away, clutching his head with both hands. He bellowed wordlessly, backing away until his spine hit the wall.

"Aedan! What is it?" Jane cried, jumping off the stool and scurrying toward him.

"Doona call me that!" he shouted, his palms clamped to his temples.

"But Aedan—"

"Haud yer wheesht, woman!"

"But I think you're remembering," she said frantically, trying

to touch him, to soothe him.

Another wordless bellow was his only reply as he raced from the hall as if all the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

Eleven

Above all else, it would be unwise to seek the company of female humans or permit them to touch you.

It would be unwise.

How had he overlooked such nonspecific phrasing?

It would be unwise. Vengeance didn't feel particularly wise at the moment. Nor did he intend to eat bland food, nor did he intend to circumvent Kyleakin because "it might be best."

Just as he'd begun to suspect, his king had, in truth, not issued a single order at all.

How and when did I meet him? Vengeance wondered for the first time. Had he been born in Faery, pledged to the king from birth? Had he met him in later years? Why couldn't he *remember*?

Vengeance sat in silence beside the gently lapping ocean, slapping the blade of a dirk against his palm.

Fairies didn't bleed. They healed too quickly.

Vengeance made a fist around the blade.

Blood seeped from his clenched hand and dripped down the sides. He spread his fingers and studied the deep cuts.

They remained deep, oozing dark crimson blood.

A harsh, relieved breath escaped him.

How old was he? How long had he lived? Why could he not recall ever changing? Why did humans gray on their heads, yet Vengeance remained unchanged?

Nothing changes in Faery.

If he never went back, would his long black hair one day silver, too? Strangely, the thought appealed to him. Thoughts of a child rose unbidden in his mind. He imagined hugging one of the wee village lasses in his arms, wiping away her tears. Teaching her to climb trees, to make boats out of wood and sail them in the surf, bringing her a litter of mewling kittens whose mother had died birthing them.

"Who am I?" Vengeance cried, clutching his head.

It occurred to him that, in truth, mayhap the right question was—who had he once been?

Jane watched him from the front steps of the castle. He sat with his back to her in the deepening twilight, clutching his head, staring out to sea. Blood was smeared on one of his hands, dripping down his arm. Suddenly he stood up, and she caught a gleam of silver as he flung a blade, end over end, into the waves.

A salty breeze whipped at his hair, tangling the dark strands into a silken skein. His plaid flapped in the breeze, hugging the powerful lines of his body.

He seemed dark and desolate and strong and utterly untouchable.

Jane's eyes misted. "I love you, Aedan MacKinnon," she told

the wind.

As if the wind eagerly whisked her words down the front lawn to the sea's edge, Aedan suddenly turned and looked straight at her. His cheeks gleamed wetly in the fading light.

He nodded once, then turned his back to her and walked off down the shore, head bowed.

Jane started after him, then stopped. There'd been such desolation in his gaze, such loneliness, yet a great deal of anger. He'd turned away, clearly demonstrating his wish to be alone. She didn't want to push him too hard. She couldn't even begin to understand what he was going through. She was elated that he was remembering and equally anguished by the pain it was causing him. She watched, torn by indecision, until he disappeared around a bend in the rocky shoreline.

Twelve

He didn't come back for three days. They were the most agonizing three days of Jane Sillee's life.

Daily, she cursed herself for pushing him too far too fast.
Daily, she berated herself for not going after him when he'd begun walking down that rocky shore.

Daily, she lied to the villagers when they came to work, assuring them he'd only gone to see a man about a horse and would return anon.

And nightly, as she curled with Sexpot in the bed that was much too large for just one lonely girl, she prayed her words would prove true.

Thirteen

It was the middle of the night when Aedan returned.

He awakened her abruptly, stripping the coverlets from her naked body, sending Sexpot flying from the bed with a disgruntled meow.

"Aedan!" Jane gasped, staring up at him. His expression was so fierce that her sleep-fogged brain cleared instantly.

He stood at the foot of the bed, his dark gaze sweeping every inch of her nude body. He'd braided his hair. His face was dark with the stubble of a black beard, shadowing his jaw. In the past few weeks, he'd lost weight, and although he was still powerfully muscular, there was a leanness to him, a dangerously hungry look, like a wolf too long alone and unfed in the wild.

He didn't say a word, just stripped off his shirt and kicked off his boots, then moved toward her.

She never would have believed it of herself, but he radiated such barely harnessed fury that she scuttled back against the headboard and crossed her arms over her breasts protectively.

"Och, nay, lass," he said with silky menace. "Not after all the times you've tried to get me to touch you. You willna naysay me now."

Jane's eyes grew huge. "I-I—"

"Touch me." He unknotted his plaid and let it fall to the floor.

Jane's jaw dropped. "I-I—" she tried again, and failed, again.

"Is something wrong with me?" he demanded.

"N-no," she managed. "Uh-uh. No way." She swallowed hard.

"And this?" He palmed his formidable erection. "This is as it should be?"

"Oh," Jane breathed reverently. "Absolutely."

He eyed her suspiciously. "You're not just saying that, are you?"

Jane shook her head, her eyes wide.

"Then give me those kisses of yours, lass, and be quick about it." He paused a moment, then added in a low, tense voice, "I'm cold, lass. I'm so cold."

Jane's breath hitched in her throat and her eyes misted. His vulnerability melted her fears. She rose to her knees on the bed and extended her hands to him.

Never breaking eye contact, staring into her eyes as if the invitation in them was all that was sustaining him, he placed his hands slowly in hers and let her pull him onto the bed, where he knelt facing her.

She glanced down at their entwined hands, and his gaze followed. Her hands were small and white, nearly swallowed by his work-roughened and tan fingers. She flexed her fingers against his, savoring the first *real* feel of holding Aedan's hand. Until that moment, she'd only touched him in

her dreams. She closed her eyes, savoring every bit of it, drinking the experience dry.

She opened them to find him regarding her with expectancy and fascination.

"Sometimes I think I know you, lass."

"You do," she said, with a little catch in her voice. "I'm Jane." *Your* Jane, she longed to cry.

He hesitated a long moment. Then, "I'm Aedan. Aedan MacKinnon."

Jane stared at him wonderingly. "You've remembered?" she exclaimed. "Oh, Aedan—"

He cut her words off with a gentle finger against her lips. "Does it matter? The villagers think I am. You think I am. Why should I not be?"

Jane's heart sank again. He still didn't recall.

But... he was here, and he was willing to let her touch him. She would take what she could get.

"Jane," he said urgently, "am I truly as a man should be?"

"*Everything* a man should be," she assured him.

"Then teach me what a man does with a woman such as you."

Aw, her heart purred. The look in his eyes was so innocent and hopeful, nearly masking the ever-present despair in his gaze.

"First," she said softly, raising his hand to her lips, "he kisses

her, like so." She planted a sweet kiss in his palm and closed his fingers over it. He did the same with both her hands, lingering over the sensitive skin of her palm.

"Then," she breathed, "he lets her touch him *all* over. Like this." She slid her hands up his muscular arms and into his hair. Removing his leather thong, she combed her fingers through the plait until it fell dark and silky around his face. She laid her palms against his face, staring into his eyes. He was still beneath her touch, his eyes unfocused.

"More," he urged, a stray tomcat, starved for touch.

"And she touches him here," she said, skimming his shoulders, the muscles of his back, down over his lean hips, and back up his magnificent abs and muscled chest. Unable to resist, she dropped her head forward against his chest and licked him, tasting the salt of his skin.

A rough groan escaped him, and the heat of his arousal throbbed insistently against her thigh.

Jane whimpered at the contact and pressed against him. She tasted his neck, his jaw, his lips and buried her hands in his hair. "Then, he brushes his lips—"

"I know this part," he said, sounding pleased with himself.

Fitting his mouth to hers, he kissed her; a deep, starving soul-kiss, and dragged her hard against his body.

The feel of her naked body against his bare skin made his head swim. Made him burn. Made him tremble with wonder. He'd never known... he'd never suspected what pleasure was to be found in touch. The feel of her wee hands on his body made him hotter than any fire could and brought him

crashing to his knees inside himself.

She'd said that he was fashioned as a man should be, and she touched him as if she desperately craved his body. He liked that. It made him feel... och, just feel and feel and *feel*.

He nibbled and suckled at her lips, then plunged his tongue deeply, thrusting. His body moved to a rhythm, innate and primal. She went supple in his arms, dropping back onto the bed, and he followed, stretching his body atop her lush softness. "Christ, lass, I've ne'er felt aught such as you!" Intoxicated, he kissed her deeply, his silky hot tongue tangling with hers. When she shifted her legs beneath him, the swollen part of him was suddenly flush between her thighs, and he thrust against her instinctively. She raised her hips, pressing back, and he thought he would die from such sensation. He cupped her bottom and pulled her more firmly against him. Digging his fingers into the softness of her bare bottom filled him with a wild and fierce sensation—an urge to possess, to hold her beneath him until she wept with pleasure. Until he shuddered atop her. Images came to him then:

Of a man and a woman rolling naked across a bed. Of the firm pistoning motion of a man's hips, of slender ankles and calves raised near a woman's breasts, of the musky scent of skin and bodies, the sweat and rawness and heat of—

"You have no clan. You have no home," the dark king said.

"Nay, I do! I have clan all o'er the Highlands. My Highlands. My home." 'Twas the thought of his clan that sustained him. Along with yet a more exquisite thought—but the king had tried to steal that other, most important thought from him, so he'd built a tower of ice around it to keep it safe.

"Everyone in your clan died a hundred years ago, you fool. Forget!"

"Nay! My people are not dead." But he knew they were. Naught but dust returned to the Highland soil.

"Everyone for whom you cared is dead. The world goes on without you. You are my Vengeance, the beast who serves my bidding."

And then the darker images, as the pain, the unending pain began... and went on and on until there was nothing left but a single frozen tear and ice where once had beat a heart that held the hallowed blood of Scottish kings.

He pushed her away, roaring.

Stunned, Jane fell back on the bed. Bewildered by his abrupt leave-taking, she stammered, "Wh-what—" She shook her head, trying to clear it, to understand what was happening. One minute he'd been about to make wildly passionate love to her, the next he was five feet away, looking horrified.

"Why did you stop?"

"I can't do this!" he shouted. "It hurts too much!"

"Aedan—it's just—"

"Nay! I canna, lass!" Eyes wild, trembling visibly, he turned and stormed from the bedchamber.

But not before she saw the remembering in his dark gaze.

Not before she saw the first faint hint of awareness of who and what he really was.

"Oh, you know," she breathed to the empty room. "You

know." Chills shivered down her spine.

And he did. She'd seen it in his gaze. In the pain etched in his face, in the stiffness of his body. He'd left her, moving like a man who'd gone ten rounds in the ring, whose ribs were bruised, whose body was contused from head to toe.

She had the sudden terrifying feeling that he might leave her, that he might simply go back to his king so that he wouldn't have to face what he would now have to face.

"Aedan!" she cried, leaping up from the bed and chasing after him.

But the castle was empty. Aedan was gone.

Fourteen

Jane trod dispiritedly into the castle, shoulders slumped. It had been a week since Aedan had left, and she had only two more days before... before... whatever was going to happen would happen. She had no idea exactly what would come to pass, but she was pretty certain he would be gone from her, forever.

No longer in this castle. No longer even in her dreams.

Leaving her to a life of what? Only memories of dreams that *nothing* could ever compare to.

Reluctant to go in search of him, in case he returned only to find *her* gone, she'd been crying off and on for a week. She'd barely been able to converse with the villagers when they came to labor every day. The castle was progressing, but to what avail? Both the "laird and lady" would likely be gone in a matter of forty-eight hours, no more. How she would miss this place! The wild rugged land, the honest, hard-working people who knew how to find joy in the smallest of things.

Sniffing back tears, she mewed for Sexpot who, for a change, didn't come scampering across the stone floor, tail swishing flirtatiously.

Glancing around with tear-blurred eyes, she drew up short.

Aedan was sitting before the hearth, feet resting on a stool, with Sexpot curled on his lap.

As if him being there, petting the "wee useless beastie" wasn't astonishing enough, he'd propped the painting Elias had unearthed weeks ago against the table facing him and was staring at it.

She must have made some small sound, because without looking up, hand moving gently over the kitten's silvery fur, he said, "I walked about the Highlands a bit. One of the villagers was kind enough to ferry me to the mainland."

Jane opened her mouth, then closed it again. Such intense relief flooded her that she nearly crumpled to her knees. She still had two more days to try. *Thank you, God*, she whispered silently.

"Much has changed," he said slowly. "Little was familiar to me. I lost my bearings a time or two."

"Oh, Aedan," she said gently.

"I needed to know this place again. And... I suppose... I needed time."

"You don't have to explain," she hastened to assure him. The mere fact that he'd returned was enough. She'd nearly given up hope.

"But I do," he said, his staring fixedly at the portrait. "There is much I need to explain to you. You have a right to know. That is," he added carefully, "if you still wish to share these quarters with me."

"I still wish to share these quarters, Aedan," she said instantly. Some of the tension seemed to leave his body. How could she make him understand that she wished not only to share "quarters" but her body and her heart? She longed to

share *everything* with him. But there was something she had to know, words she needed to hear him say. "Do you know who you are yet?" She held her breath, waiting.

He looked at her levelly, a bittersweet smile playing faintly upon his lips. "Och, aye, lass. I am Aedan MacKinnon. Son of Findanus and Mary MacKinnon, from Dun Haakon on the Isle of Skye. Born in eight hundred ninety-eight. Twice-removed grandson of Kenneth McAlpin. And I am the last of my people." He turned his gaze back to the portrait.

His words, delivered so regally, yet with such sorrow, sent a chill up her spine. "Beyond that, you need only tell me what you wish," she said softly.

"Then I bid you listen well, for I doona ken when I may have the will to speak it again." That said, he grew pensively silent and gazed into the fire, as if searching for the right words.

Finally, he stirred and said, "When I was a score and ten a... man of sorts... came to this castle. At first, I thought that he'd come to challenge me, for I was heralded the most powerful warrior in all the isles, descended from the mighty McAlpin himself. Mayhap I was a bit pleased with myself." He grimaced self-deprecatingly.

"But this man..." He trailed off shaking his head. "This man—he terrified even me. He looked like a man, but he was dead inside. Ice. Cold. Not human, but human. I know that doesn't make sense, but 'twas as if all the life had been sucked from him somehow, yet still he breathed. I feared he would harm my people and mock me while doing so. He was great and tall and wide, and he had powers beyond mortal."

When he paused, lost in his memories, Jane whispered,

"Please go on."

He took a deep breath. "Ma and Da were away at sea with all my siblings but the youngest. I was here with my wee sister." He gestured to the portrait. "Rose." He closed his eyes and rubbed them. "Although I may have suffered my share of arrogance, lass, all I'd e'er wished for was a family, children of my own, to watch my sisters and brothers grow and raise their children. To live a simple life. To be a man of honor. A man that when he was laid into the earth, others said, 'He was a good man.' Yet on that day, I knew that such things would ne'er come to pass, for the man who'd come for me threatened to destroy my entire world. *And I knew he could do it.*"

Eyes misting, Jane hurried to him, sank onto the footstool, and placed a gentle, encouraging hand on his thigh.

He covered it with his own, staring at the portrait.

After a few moments, he turned his head and looked at her, and she gasped softly at the anguish in his eyes. She wanted to press kisses to his eyelids as if to somehow kiss all the pain away, to make sure nothing ever hurt him again.

"I made a deal with the creature that if he left my clan in peace I would go with him to his king. His king offered a bargain and I accepted, thinking five years would be a hellish price to pay, wondering how I could withstand five years in his icy, dark kingdom. But it was ne'er five years, lass—'twas five hundred. Five hundred years and I forgot. *I forgot.*" He slammed a fist down on the arm of the chair. Thrusting the kitten at her, he leaped to his feet and began pacing. Sexpot, alarmed by the sudden commotion, scampered off for the calm of the bedchamber.

"I became just like him—the one who'd come to claim me. I lost all honor. I became the vilest of vile, the—"

"Aedan, stop," Jane cried.

"I became that thing I despised, lass!"

"You were tortured," she defended. "Who could survive five centuries of... of..." She trailed off, not knowing what he'd withstood.

Aedan snorted angrily. "I let them go. To escape the things that the king did to me. I let memories of my clan, of my Rose, go. The more I forgot, the less he punished me. God, there are things in the dark king's realm, things so..." He snarled, shaking his head.

"You *had* to forget," Jane said intensely. "It's a miracle that you survived. And although you might think you became this Vengeance creature who came for you—you *didn't*. I saw the goodness in you when I came here. I saw the tenderness, the part of you that was aching to be a simple man again."

"But you doona know the things I've done," he said, his voice harsh and deep and unforgiving.

"I don't need to know. Unless you wish to tell me, I need never know. All I need to know is that you are never going back to him. You're never going back to him, are you?" Jane pressed.

He said nothing, just stood there, looking lost and full of self-loathing. His head bowed, his hair curtaining his face.

"Stay with me. I want you, Aedan," she said, her heart aching.

"How *could* you? How could anyone?" he asked bitterly.

Ah, she thought, understanding. He hungered to be part of the mortal world—that was why he'd come back to Dun Haakon, rather than turning to his king—but he felt he didn't deserve it. He feared no one would want him, that once she knew what he'd been, she would cast him out.

He glanced at her, then quickly glanced away, but not before she saw the hope warring with the despair in his gaze.

Rising to her feet, Jane held out her hand. "Take my hand, Aedan. That's all you need do."

"You doona know what these hands have done."

"Take my hand, Aedan."

"Begone, lass. A woman such as you is not for the likes of me."

"Take my hand," she repeated. "You can take it now. Or ten years from now. Or twenty. Because I will still be standing here waiting for you to take my hand. I'm not leaving you. I'm *never* leaving you."

His anguished gaze shot to hers. "Why?"

"Because I love you," Jane said, her eyes filling with tears. "I love you, Aedan MacKinnon. I've loved you forever."

"Who are you? Why do you even *care* about me?" His voice rose and cracked hoarsely.

"You still don't remember me?" Jane asked plaintively.

Aedan thought hard, pushing into the deepest part of him,

that part that still was iced over. A hard shining tower of ice still lay behind his breast, concealing something. Helplessly, he shook his head.

Jane swallowed hard. It didn't really matter, she told herself. He didn't have to remember their time together in the Dreaming. She could live with that, if it meant she could spend the rest of her life here on this island with him. "It's okay," she said finally with a brave smile. "You don't have to remember me, as long as you—" She broke off abruptly, feeling suddenly too vulnerable for words.

"As long as I what, lass?"

In a small voice, she finally said, "Do you think you could care for me? In the way a man cares for his woman?"

Aedan sucked in a harsh breath. If only she knew. For the week he'd wandered, he'd thought of little else. Knowing he should do her the favor of never returning, yet unable to stay away. Dreaming of her, waking to find his arms reaching for nothing. Until, unable to push her from his heart, he'd faced his memories. Until, scorning himself for a fool, he'd returned to Dun Haakon to force her to force him to leave. To see the disgust in her gaze. To be sent away so he could die inside.

But now she stood there, hands outstretched, asking him to stay. Asking him to make free with her body and heart.

Offering him a gift he hadn't deserved but vowed to earn.

"You wish that of me? I who was scarce human when you met me? You could have any man you wished, lass. Any of the villagers. Nay, even Scotia's king."

"I want only you. Or no one. Ever."

"You would trust me so? To be your... man?"

"I trust you already."

Aedan stared at her. He began to speak several times, then closed his mouth again.

"If you refuse me, I'll cast myself into the sea," she announced dramatically. "And *die*." Not really, because Jane Sillee wasn't a quitter, but he needn't know that.

"Nay—you will not go to the sea!" he roared. Eyes glittering, he moved toward her.

"I am so lonely without you, Aedan," Jane said simply.

"You truly want me?"

"More than anything. I'm only half without you."

"Then you are my woman." His words were finality, a bond he would not permit broken. She had given herself to his keeping. He would never let her go.

"And you'll never leave me?" she pressed.

"I'll stay with you for all of ever, lass."

Jane's eyes flared, and she looked at him strangely. "And then yet another day?" she asked breathlessly.

"Oh, aye."

"And we could have babies?"

"Half dozen if you wish."

"Could we start making them now?"

"Oh, aye." A grin touched his lips; the first full grin she'd ever seen on his gorgeous face. The effect was devastating: It was a dangerous, knowing grin that dripped sensual promise. "I should warn you," he said, his eyes glittering, "I recall what it is to be a man now, lass. *All* of it. And I was ever a man of greedy and demanding appetites."

"Oh, please," Jane breathed. "Be as greedy as you wish. Demand away."

"I will begin small," he said, his eyes sparkling. "We will begin with the pressing of the lips you so favor," he teased.

Jane flung herself at him, and when his arms closed around her, she went wild, touching and kissing and clinging to him.

"Woman, I need you," he growled, slanting his mouth across hers. "Ever since I remembered the things a man knows, all I could think of were the things I ached to do to you."

"Show me," she whimpered.

And he did, taking his sweet time, peeling away her gown until she was naked before him, kissing and suckling and tasting every inch of her.

He experienced no difficulty whatsoever finding her most private heat.

Fifteen

The Unseelie king sensed it the precise moment he lost his Vengeance. Though the mortal Highlander had not yet regained full memory, he loved and was loved in return.

The king's visage changed in a manner most rare for him; the corners of his lips turned up.

Humans, he thought mockingly, so easily manipulated. How infuriated they would be if they knew it had never been about them to begin with, and, indeed, rarely was. His Vengeance had performed precisely as he'd expected, twisting his three nebulous suggestions, and with obstinate human defiance, aiding the king in his aim.

Eons ago, a young Seelie queen for whom he suffered an unending hunger had escaped him before he'd been through with her.

She'd not risked entering his realm again.

His smile grew. If he must stoop to conquer, it was not beneath him.

He swallowed a laugh, tossed his head back, and let loose an enraged roar that resonated throughout the fabric of the universe.

The Seelie queen beard the dark king's cry and permitted

herself a small, private smile.

So, she mused, feeling quite lovely, he had lost and she had won. It made her feel positively magnanimous. Sipping the nectar from a splendidly plump dalisonia, she rolled onto her back and stretched languidly.

Perhaps she should offer the dark king her condolences, she mused. After all, they were royalty, and royalty did that sort of thing.

After all, she had won.

She could simply duck in and back out, gloat a bit.

And if he tried to restrain her? Keep her captive in his realm? She laughed softly. She'd beaten him this time. She'd *proved* that she was stronger than she'd been millennia ago when he'd caged her for a time.

Feeling potent, inebriated on victory, she closed her eyes and envisioned his icy lair...

The iciness of his realm stole her breath away. Then she saw him and inhaled sharply, sucking in great lungfuls of icy air. Her memory had not done him justice. He was even more exotic than she'd recalled. A palpable darkness surrounded him. He was deadly and powerful, and she knew from intimate experience just how inventively, exhaustively erotic he was. A true master of pain, he understood pleasure as no other could.

"My queen," he said, his eyes of night and ice glittering.

Even as powerful as the Seelie queen was, she found it

impossible to gaze into his eyes for more than a moment. Some claimed they'd been emptied of matter and pure chaos spooned into the sockets.

She inclined her head, averting her gaze ever so slightly. "It would seem you have lost your Vengeance, dark one," she murmured.

"It would seem I have."

When he rose from his throne of ice, and rose and rose, she caught her breath. Not quite fairy, his blood mixed with the blood of a creature even the Fae hesitated to name. His shadow moved unnaturally as he rose, slithering around him, wont to move independently of its host.

"You seem unperturbed by your defeat, dark one," she probed, determined to savor every drop of her victory. "Care you not that you have lost him? Five centuries of work. Wasted."

"You presume you knew my aim."

The Seelie queen stiffened, staring into his eyes for a moment longer than was wise. "Pretend not that you intended to lose. That I have been manipulated." Her voice dripped ice worthy of his kingdom.

"Loss is a relative thing."

"I won. *Admit* it," she snapped.

"I doubt you even knew what game we played, young one." His voice deep, silky, and mesmerizing, he mocked, "Did you come to gloat because my defeat made you feel powerful? Did it make you feel safe in seeking me? Careful. A being

such as I might be inclined to find you reason to condescend. To sink to my depths."

"I have sunk to nothing," she hissed, feeling suddenly foolish. She *was* young by his standards, for the king of darkness was ancient—sprung from the loins of an age she'd heard of only in legend.

He said nothing, merely regarded her, his stare a palpable weight. She repressed a shiver, remembering her last excursion to his land. She'd nearly failed to summon the power to leave. But, she conceded with a thrill of sexual anticipation so intense that it nearly brought her to her knees, she'd not quite been in a hurry to leave the dark king's dangerous bed. And therein lay double the danger...

"I came to offer my condolences," she said coolly.

His laughter alone could seduce. "So offer, my queen." He moved in a swirl of darkness. "But offer that for which we both know you hunger. Your willing surrender."

And when he was upon her, when he had gathered her up and his great wings began to flap, she let her head fall against his icy breast. Darkness so thick it had texture and taste surrounded her. "Never."

"Heed me well, light one, the only thing you are never with me—is safe."

Much later, when he possessed her completely, a full blood moon stained the sky above the Highlands of Scotland.

Aedan made love to Jane like a man who understood that this

day, this moment, only this *now* was securely in the palm of his hand, taking her with the passionate urgency of a tenth-century Scotsman who knew not what tomorrow might bring: brutal war, drought, or crop-destroying tempest. He made love like a drowning man, desperate for the surety of her body—she was his shore, his raft, his harbor against what storms may come.

And then he made love to her again.

This time, with exquisite gentleness. Brushed his lips against the warm hollow of her neck in which her heartbeat pulsed. Kissed the slopes of her breasts, tasted the salt of her skin and the sweetness of her passion glistening between her thighs, and flexed himself deep within her innermost warmth.

He became part of her. Finally, he knew the kind of loving that made two one and understood Jane was his world. His ocean, his country, his sun, his rain, his very heart.

And that sleek, iced citadel behind his breastbone—behind which he'd concealed from the dark king that which was most infinitely precious to him—cracked at the foundations and came crashing down.

And he finally remembered what he'd sealed away there... his Jane.

"Jane, my own sweet Jane," he cried hoarsely.

Jane's eyes flew wide. He was buried deep within her, loving her slowly and intensely, and although he'd called her name aloud many times during the loving, his voice sounded different this time.

Could it be he'd finally remembered all of it? All those years they'd spent together in dreams, playing and loving and dancing and loving?

"Aedan?" His name held the question she was afraid to ask.

Framing her head with his forearms, he stared down at her. "You came to me. I remember now. You came when I slept, in the Dreaming."

"Yes," Jane cried, joyous tears misting her eyes.

There were no words for a time, only the soft sounds of passion, of a woman being thoroughly loved by her man.

When finally she could catch her breath again, she said, "You were with me always. You watched me grow up, remember?" She laughed self-consciously. "When I was thirteen, I nearly dreaded seeing you because I was so gawky—"

"Nay, you were no such thing. You were a wee lovely lass, I watched your womanhood ripening and saw what you would become. I ached for the day you would be old enough that I could love you in every way."

"Well, you didn't have to wait *quite* so long," she voiced a long-harbored complaint. "Mmm," she added, gasping, when he nipped her nipple lightly with his teeth. "Do that again."

He did. And again, until her breasts felt ripe and exquisitely sensitive. Then he rubbed his unshaven cheek lightly against her peaked nipples, creating delicious friction.

"I claimed you when you were ten and eight," he managed finally.

"Like I said—long. I was ready way before then. I was ready

by sixteen... *ooh!*"

"You were a wee babe still," he said indignantly, stilling inside her.

"Don't stop," she gasped.

"Doona think for a minute 'twasn't difficult for me to naysay you. 'Twas that my mother insisted all her sons forgo impatience and give a lass time to be a child before having bairn of her own."

"Please," she whimpered.

Heeding her plea, he thrust without cease, and she cried out his name over and again, digging her fingers into his muscular hips, pulling him as deep as she could take him.

He kissed her, taking her cries with his lips until her shudders subsided.

"Have you had time enough, wee Jane?" he asked later, when she lay drowsy and sated in his arms. "We may have made one this very day, you ken."

Jane beamed. His shimmering eyes were again a warm tropical surf in his dark face, his lips curved with sensuality and tenderness. He'd finally remembered her! And she might have his baby growing inside her. "I want half a dozen at least," she assured him, smiling.

Then she sobered, touching his jaw lightly. "When I was twenty-two, the dreams seemed different. They became repeats of earlier dreams."

His jaw tensed beneath her hand.

"I lost you," she said. "Didn't I?"

"The king discovered I was gaining strength from my dreams. He prevented me from joining you there," Aedan said tersely.

She inhaled sharply. "How?" she asked, not certain she wanted to know.

"You doona wish to know, and I doona need to speak of it. 'Tis over and done," he said, his eyes darkening.

Jane didn't press, and let it go, for now, knowing the time would come when he would need to speak of it, and she would be there to listen. For now, she would wait while Aedan became fully Aedan again.

He smiled suddenly, dazzling her. "You were my light, wee Jane. My laughter, my hope, my love, and now you will be my wife."

"*Ahem*," she said pertly, "if you think you're getting off with that lame proposal, you have another thought coming."

He laughed. "Your headstrong nature was one of the first things I favored in you, lass. So much fire, and as cold as I was, your tempers kept me warm. Saucy like my mother, demanding like my sisters, yet tender of heart and weak of will when it comes to passion."

"Who are you calling weak?" she said, with mock indignation.

Aedan gave her a provocative glance from beneath half-lowered lids. " 'Tis obvious you have a weakness for me. You spent the past fortnight trying to seduce me—"

"Only because you'd forgotten me! Otherwise *you* would have been chasing *me* around!"

Certain of it, she scrambled from beneath him and slipped from the bed, then dashed out into the great hall. Sure enough, he followed, stalking her like a great greedy dark beast.

And when he caught her...

And when he caught her, he made wild, passionate love to her. Celestial music trumpeted from the heavens. Celestial music trumpeted from the heavens: (It did. I swear.) Rainbows gathered to shimmer above Dun Haakon. Heather bloomed, and even the sun's brilliance paled in comparison to the luminosity of true love.

And when he proposed again, it was on bended knee, with a band of gold embedded with tiny heart-shaped rubies, as he vowed to love her for all of ever. Then yet another day.

Excerpted from the unpublished manuscript *Highland Fire*
by Jane Sillee MacKinnon

Epilogue

"Don't forget the latest chapter, Aedan," Jane reminded as he slipped from their bed. "I missed last week, and Henna said they're going to storm the castle if I don't let them know what's going on with Beth and Duncan."

"I won't forget, lass." Donning shirt and plaid, Aedan picked up the parchments from the sidetable. He glanced at the top page.

She held her breath, waiting for him to kiss her, knowing that she would never be the same once she'd tasted the passion of his embrace. Her braw Highlander had fought valiantly for the Bruce and had come home to her wounded in body and heart. But she would heal him...

"You know, the men say that since their wives have been reading your tales they're much more... er, amorous," Aedan told her. Downright bawdy, the men had actually said. Insatiable. Plotting ways to seduce their men at all hours. Her stories had the same effect on him. Reading one of her love scenes never failed to make him hard as a rock. He wondered if she suspected that before delivering her pages to the eager women, he stopped in the tavern where the husbands listened, with much jesting and guffawing, as he read the most recent installment. Although they made sport of the

"mushy parts," not one of them failed to show each Tuesday when he made his weekly trip to the village. Last week, three of them had come looking for *him* when he'd failed to appear with that week's installment.

"Really?" Jane was delighted.

"Aye," he said, grinning. "They thank you for it."

Jane beamed. As he pulled on his boots, she reminded him, "Oh, and don't forget, I want peach ice, not blueberry."

"I willna forget," he promised. "You've got the entire village making your favored dish. I vow when the spring thaws come and they can't make your icy cream they may go mad."

Jane smiled. She'd been unable to resist teaching the villagers a few things that she deemed reasonably harmless. It wasn't like she was advancing technology before its time. Pushing the drapes aside, she glanced out the window behind the bed. "It snowed again last night. Look— isn't it beautiful, Aedan?" she exclaimed.

Aedan pulled the drapes back over the window and tucked the covers more securely around her. "Aye, 'tis lovely. And damned cold. Are you warm enough?" he worried. Without waiting for her reply, he stacked several more logs on the fire and banked it carefully. "I doona want you getting out of bed. You mustn't catch a chill."

Jane made a face. "I'm not *that* pregnant, Aedan. I still have two more months."

"I willna take any chances with you or our daughter."

"Son."

"Daughter."

Jane's laughter was cut off abruptly when he took her in his arms and kissed her long and hard before leaving.

At the doorway he paused. "If 'tis a lass," he asked softly, "do you think we might name her Rose?"

"Oh, yes, Aedan," Jane said softly. "I'd like that."

After he left, Jane lay back against the pillows, marveling. Seven months had passed since her arrival at Dun Haakon, and although there'd been some difficult moments, she wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world.

Aedan still had a great deal of darkness inside him, of times and things he rarely discussed. There had been somber months while he'd grieved the loss of his clan. Then finally, one morning she'd come down from their new bedchamber above-stairs and found him hanging the old portraits in the great hall. She'd watched him, praying he wouldn't have that stark expression in his eyes. When he'd raised his head and smiled at her, her heart had soared.

" 'Tis time to honor the past," he'd told her. "We have a rich history, lass. I want our children to know their grandparents."

Then he'd made love to her, there in the great hall. They'd rolled across the floor, paused for a heated interlude on the table, and ended up, she recalled, blushing, in a most interesting position over a chair.

All of her dreams had come true. The village women waited with bated breath for the latest "installment" of her serial novel. They lapped up every word, savoring the romance, and the magic of it spilled over into their hearth and home.

And no one ever complained about purple prose or typos.

She was a storyteller with an eager audience, a mother-to-be, had a milking cow of her own, reasonably hot water, the scent of her man all over her skin, and she slept each night held tightly in the arms of the man she loved.

Dreamily, she sighed, resting her hand on her tummy. Sexpot gave a little pink-tongued yawn and snuggled closer beside her.

Life was *good*.

Author's Note

My younger sister has long entertained me with Silly Jane Jokes. What is a Silly Jane Joke? Elizabeth is so glad you asked!

A carpenter asked the very curvaceous Silly Jane to help him. He'd hurt his foot and needed someone to climb up the ladder and retrieve his bucket of paint from the top. But Silly Jane was no fool. She knew that he just wanted to look up her dress and see her panties when she climbed it. So she tricked him. She took her panties off first.

This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between Silly Jane and Jane Sillee is purely coincidental. Really.